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FEBRUARY 1936

10 CENTS

"RIVER OF NO RETURN"

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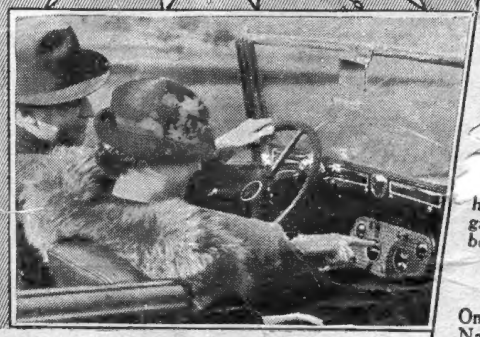

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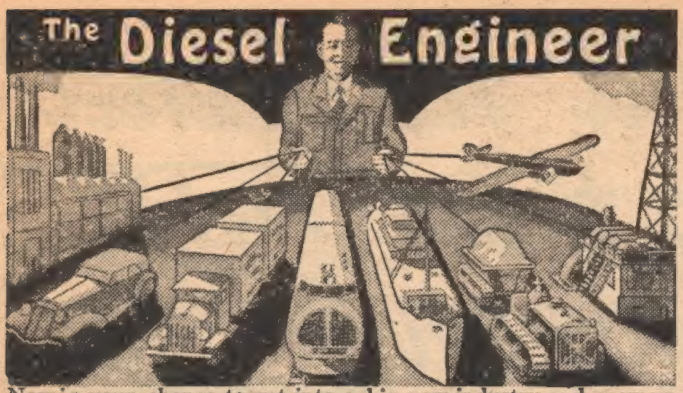

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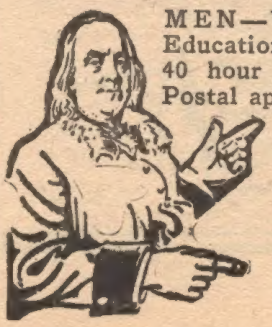

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CHAPTER I:

RATS—AND A TRAP.

FOG swirled in snakelike streamers through the shadow-darkened streets. It seemed to clutch at the sides of the tall buildings with ghostly fingers of white. Street lamps made dull blobs through the mist.

There was no noise. This section of Chicago was a busy hive by day. But the men and women who tenanted the tall buildings that made a canyon of the street were now sleeping in their homes. If there were night watchmen or charwomen in those great buildings, they performed their duties quietly. The silence of the streets was almost tangible.

Suddenly twin pencils of light preceded the dull humming of a powerful motor. A black sedan glided down the street.

Two men were on the wide, front seat of the car. The driver sat like a statue. His companion turned every few seconds and looked back.

"They still on our trail?" from the driver.

"Yeah. Maybe you'd better step on it a little more, Sam."

"You leave it to me, Lou," was the retort. "I know what I'm doing. I'm running this can."

"Maybe you were wrong, Sam," Lou said. "They mightn't be Feds at all."

"They're Feds, all right!" the driver snapped with the air of a man who held strong opinions.

Lou looked puzzled. "Then why didn't we take it on the lam when you spotted 'em?" he asked. "We could have left the old bus right where it was. It's a hot car, anyhow. They'd never be able to trace us."

"Don't talk so much, Lou," Sam the driver ordered. "You're new in this racket. There's a lot of things you've got to learn."

THE driver did not turn his head. He moved not a single muscle. Even when he spoke, his lips did not appear to be moving. A few terms "in stir" had made him proficient in the art of conversing with companions without the knowledge of alert guards.

"Slip around in that seat, Lou!" he ordered. "I can pike 'em off through the mirror. Looks to me like you're nervous."

Lou faced back front. "Aw, I ain't nervous," he insisted. But his voice had the merest hint of a quaver.

The driver did not protest the point. Yet there was a saturnine expression on his sharp face as he sent the car humming along the canyonlike street. He was perfectly poised. He was coolest when under fire.

"What you cutting down the speed for?" Lou demanded.

"I got a reason," was the retort. "Leave it to me. Don't talk so damned much!"

The driver turned up a side street, increased the speed for a pair of blocks, then cut it down again. At the first boulevard crossing he turned left, after the reflection in the mirror told him that the car behind him was still on his trail.

He guided the car through the rim of the business section, crossed a wide street flanked by new apartment houses. His trailers stayed about the same distance to the rear.

A vacant lot was passed now and then. Finally the lighted district was in back of him. He drove the car at a steady speed along a gloomy suburban road. Suddenly he flashed on his "brights"—the strong lights forbidden within the city limits.

"What you putting your brights on for?" Lou wanted to know.

"I want 'em to know where I'm going, don't I?"

Lou's puzzled expression showed that he did not understand.

The wilier Sam continued: "Listen, bo. This whole business is a natural. I see them two guys piking us off. I says to myself 'They're Feds.' I know Feds when I see 'em, so what do I do?"

He did not wait for the dull-witted Lou to speak. "I give you the office," he went on. "We climb into the car. Them Feds was wised up by some one. They start to tail us."

There was a superior smile on his sharp face. "Them guys don't want just *us!* They want to know where our hide-out is! So I'm taking 'em for a ride. That's why I ain't been stepping on it. Get me? We can't let 'em think we're trying to get away. We *want* them guys to tail us to the hide-out—since there's only a pair of 'em!"

Lou, whose brains were mainly in his fingers and who was handy with an automatic, shook his head. "But why not give 'em the works out here on this lonely road?"

"We'd be in big business doing that, wouldn't we?" the driver came back with a sneer. "Nope, when we give 'em the works, we'll have 'em in a place where their bodies won't be found!"

His sharp glance flicked to the mirror. His trailers were about the same distance to the rear.

"They're sticking close," he remarked with a chuckle. "This is going to be good, this is. There'll be two Feds less in the world after to-night!"

"Maybe," Lou agreed, "but them Feds are slick. I got a hunch maybe somethin'll happen."

"What the hell could happen?" the driver snapped. "This set-up is perfect. It's a natural. We got this thing sewed up like a shroud."

He laughed again—a hard, bitter laugh. "Like a shroud!" he repeated. "You know what a shroud is, don't you? It's what they sew dead people up in."

"Aw, lay off!" Lou came back. "What's the use of talking about things like that?"

Lou's voice sounded uncertain, a trifle scary. When he asserted himself from time to time, there was obvious bluster in his tones—a bluster which hid, or tried to hide, fear.

"Like a shroud!" the cool-voiced driver said again. "What's the matter, Lou? You're looking sort o' nervous."

SEVERAL miles out of town, the first car came to a stop. The driver looked back. He could see the lights of the following car some distance back along the road. He shifted into first, then drove slowly into a darkened lane.

Trees, dark and forbidding, flanked both sides of the driveway and faded away to the rear in a dull smudge of shadows. The car's strong headlights cut two white cones through the gloom.

"Better snap out the lights," Lou suggested. "Their car's stopped just down the road."

"Yeah, I know it. But we won't put out the lights. We don't want 'em to think we're pulling anything. We'll act like we didn't even know we've been trailed. Now, listen! Get this right!"

In terse sentences and in a low tone Sam explained what the inexperienced Lou was to do. Lou was to keep the lights on and maneuver the car into the garage at the end of the driveway. He was to take his time about it, but not so much time as to excite suspicion.

After he got the car in the garage, he was to stand in front of it, where the lights would pick him out, for the men would most certainly be watching. He was to look under the hood for a moment, as if searching for some mechanical imperfection in the motor.

Then he was to snap off the lights and walk into the house with a casual air. That way, the trailers would not suspect that he knew he was being watched.

Meanwhile, Sam the driver would have ample time to get into the house and tip off the big shot as to just what was up. When the Federals snooped around in a few minutes, thinking to take the house by surprise, they would be the ones to be surprised—for just a second or so. They would be beyond surprise—beyond any feeling at all, after that.

Sam got out of the car. He walked around in front of the headlights and turned toward the square, old-fashioned frame structure, which was in darkness.

He passed the first door, which was off the wide veranda with the lacy scroll work over the arches, and made for the rear entrance. He mounted a rickety back stoop.

It was not necessary to rap on the door. The door opened. The look-out, a small, fat man, let him in and spoke respectfully to him, for Sam was the lieutenant of the big boss.

ADVERTISING SECTION

"Listen, Tubby!" he whispered when the door was closed. "The Feds have been tailing us. Keep your head up. Lou'll be here in a couple of minutes. When he comes in, bolt the door. Don't let him tell you nothing. Don't let him talk at all; he blabs too much. After that, the big boss'll tell you what to do."

"O. K.," "Tubby" said. Like Sam, he was a man of steel-tipped nerves.

SAM went upstairs, turned into a large front room practically barren of furniture except for the straight-backed chair set behind a partially lowered shade. The big boss sat there in the gloom, cautiously peering out the window.

"Great set-up, boss," Sam reported. "This is going to be just a workout."

He explained how the two men believed to be Federals had spotted Lou and himself, and told how he had led them into the trap.

The big boss said nothing, and Sam sensed that he was not entirely pleased. To correct whatever unfavorable impression he might have made, he went into brief details.

"It was the best way, boss, I'm telling you," he said. "S'posing they'd picked us up. Well, *I'd* been all right, you know that. But this new guy, this Lou, ain't fit for the racket. He'd throw up his guts as soon as they would start to work on him."

"He's sugar with a rod," the big boss said.

"Yeah, but he's been in small-time rackets. He can't stand up to it. Nervous. I don't mean he's wrong, exactly. He ain't a rat. He's—well, just a mouse."

The boss did not believe in unnecessary talk. He sat there, peering out into the road. "If there's only two of 'em, then it's O. K.," he said, finally.

"Tell you what we'd better do," the wily Sam suggested. "We'd better snap on just one light—after Lou gets in. It'll look like he put on the light before he crawled into bed. Then we'll douse the light—and wait. They'll think we're all asleep. Will *they* be wrong?" he chuckled.

The boss agreed, and Sam walked into a side room and put on a light where it could be seen from the road. A few minutes after they heard Lou come in, Sam snapped it out again. He and the boss stood close to the front window and watched.

"Where's Slinger?" Sam asked suddenly.

"Slinger's hit the hay." The boss looked up. "Why?"

Sam hesitated for several seconds. "Well, I don't want to get out the hammer for everybody, boss. But somehow Slinger seems wrong to me."

The big boss started. He respected the shrewdness of Sam. The big boss had the force, the connections, the experience, but all the mob agreed that Sam couldn't be topped on brains. Sam had hunches. He doped things out. He was seldom wrong on a man.

"I had to get this mob together in a hurry," the boss said. "I had to take a chance on them new men—Slinger and Lou. But Perretti said Lou was O. K., and Slinger had them letters from Moran in Brooklyn."

"They could be faked."

"Yeah. I realize that. I wired Moran to-day. I got an answer to another wire—that one we sent to Arizona—about two hours later. I opened it in front of Slinger. Thinking back on it now, Slinger acted funny when he saw me opening the envelope. Maybe I just imagined it, though."

"I'll lay the odds it was more than imagination," Sam insisted. "He probably thought it was the real tip-off from Moran. You sure he couldn't have slipped out?"

"Bet I'm sure. Tubby's on the lookout. Tubby never misses nothing."

There was a hard note in the boss's

voice as he went on: "Slinger wanted to go downtown to-night. Said he had a date with a dame. I put the kibosh on that."

"He's wrong, all right. I'll lay the odds. Well, we can have a little talk with Slinger after this other business is over."

THE big boss nodded. He and his lieutenant formed quick plans as they continued to peer cautiously through the window. After a moment, Sam, the wily one, went quietly downstairs, continued down into the cellar, and removed one of the rickety sliding windows.

This would be good bait. The Federals, prowling about for the best means of entry, would come across this. They would believe the men in the suspected house to be asleep. It was a ten-to-one shot that they would at least climb into the cellar for a preliminary investigation.

"Pug" Curry and "Booter" Wilson, two gorillalike members of the gang, would be in just the proper place to slug them when they got into the pitch-dark cellar. The hide-out was in an unsettled section, but there was another house a few hundred yards around a bend in the road, and if they could get their enemies without any shots, so much the better.

His job finished, his men properly stationed, the rest of the men warned—except the suspected "Slinger," who was not disturbed from his slumber—Sam climbed back to the second floor again.

The big boss was restless. He had seen no one prowling outside. But neither had there been any noise of a car being started down the road, so the chances were that the Federals had not gone back to town for more men.

Sam and the big boss conversed quietly. "After this is over," Sam said, "we'd better not take any chances on Lou. Lou's yellow. I could see that to-night. And he talks too much."

"Don't worry about Lou," the boss said quietly. "After this is over, *he'll* be taken care of, all right!"

Sam started to say something, then stopped abruptly and glided back from the curtained window.

Two shadowy forms were sneaking crouchingly in from the road, circling around to the east of the driveway.

"Here's the rats," the big boss whispered.

"Yep. And here's the trap," Sam said with relish. "Baby! Santa Claus is being good to us to-night. They ain't got a chance. Look! One of 'em's spotted that open cellar window. Baby! What a sweet set-up! We'll just——"

He whirled as the curtain across the hallway door moved slightly.

"Get those hands up—the two of you!" came a command.

The command was given by Slinger, the new member of the mob who had carried letters from the Brooklyn big shot.

CHAPTER II.

SECRET OF THE RIVER.

THE big boss whirled and put up his hands, but Sam's hand flashed to his shoulder holster as he made a dive in the direction of the curtain.

He was as quick as a snake, and Slinger knew it. Slinger fired just as Sam's weapon came up. Still skidding along the dirty, uncarpeted floor, Sam lashed out with his free hand, missed Slinger, caught the curtain instead. Slinger's bullet had smashed into his chest. Struggling in agony, Sam pulled down the curtain. He made one more twitching movement, then lay very still. The curtain covered his body like a shroud.

"You get it the same way—if you put those hands down!" was Slinger's crisp command to the big boss.

"I got 'em up, ain't I?" the boss flung back. "So you rooked me, huh? I should have taken Sam's advice. Sam was just about wise that you were a lousy G man."

There were shouts from below; then the clatter of feet. From the deep recesses of the cellar came the sound of snarling automatics. Slinger's shot had warned the Federal men, who had not quite had time to crawl into the trap. Pug and Booter had opened fire on them, and they were firing back as they retreated along the shadowed driveway.

The clatter on the stairs grew louder. Slinger was calm, but he knew he was in a bad spot. He leaped to the side of the big boss, frisked him quickly, relieved him of a snub-nosed automatic, and whirled just as three of the gang reached the top of the stairway. Almost at the same instant, there was a crash of window glass as the big boss dived through the window.

Slinger took no chances. Coolly, he fired, dropped Tubby Ollis, the fat little doorman, who was in the lead. He knew Tubby to be poison with a gun.

Tubby toppled down the stairway, taking the man back of him—a wiry, red-headed fellow—with him. Lou, the third man, had a chance to get Slinger just then. But Lou was not up to it. He was used to shooting men in the back, to take them for rides. He did not have the courage for an even, stand-up battle. He pretended to fall down the stairway, the maneuver getting him out of range of Slinger's gun.

Slinger ran to the window. Better to jump than to be trapped in the house. Lou and "Red" and the rest of the gang downstairs would get organized, would rush back up and bump him. The odds were too great against him.

But as he warily gauged the distance down to the mangy lawn, an automatic spat reddish-orange down there. A slug sailed past Slinger and ripped into the door of the rear room. The big boss must have ducked into the house and gotten hold of an extra weapon.

"Inside the house, there! Get Slinger, boys!" came the shrill voice of the big boss. "Come on, Tubby and Red! There's a grand for the guy that gets the rat!"

SLINGER crouched back from the window. Shots were still banging down on the driveway. He could see the flashes as the government men, from the shelter of a hedge, were firing toward the cellar window. A banging from that direction indicated that Pug and Booter were still there.

Slinger took a chance and showed part of his face above the window sill.

"Get away from that hedge, boys!" he yelled to the government men. "They've got a machine gun. This is Walker, No. 212. Get back—quick!"

He had barely finished his warning before the deadly *ra-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta* of a Tommy gun sounded from one of the first-floor windows. Slinger could see his two colleagues mowed down like wheat before his eyes.

Immediately he changed his mind about trying to leap to the lawn. Whoever was at that first-floor window with the Tommy gun could get him in an instant.

He heard the clatter of feet on the stairway again, ran into the back room, closed and bolted the door.

Heavy forms hurled against it. The door almost gave way. Slinger emptied his automatic through the door, then quickly slipped in another clip.

There was no window in the room where he had taken shelter. He crouched over near the rumpled bed, cool but desperate. He was waiting for the heavy forms to thump against the door again.

When the door came down, he could get one or more of the men, then try to run for it, down the stairway. It

was a poor chance, but it was the only one.

But no more of the gang tried to force the door. Slinger heard the sly scuff of feet, heard the low voice of the big boss. At that moment, he realized what was up. They were bringing in the Tommy gun to smoke him out. He crawled under the bed.

Almost immediately he heard the death rattle of the machine gun. The door panel rapidly became a sieve. The door crashed, splintered. The lock was smashed.

From his position beneath the bed, Slinger fired out into the hallway as the machine gun, probably poked out under the stairway balustrate—he could see only the flashes—hailed death into the room. The killers were sweeping the little room with bullets.

The lead ripped through the wall like tissue paper, clinked against the metal bed, shredded the bedclothes.

Slinger emptied his automatic, started to crawl over to where an old oak dresser might at least give him scant protection. His one hope was that the noise might be heard in the house around the bend or by some one passing in a car.

But almost with the thought came a cluster of slugs that crumpled him to the dusty floor. A new stream of bullets traced across his face and erased his features to a bloody pulp.

Albert Walker, No. 212, posing as Slinger Shields, had passed on.

THE big boss, limping slightly from his jarring leap to the lawn, but still cool and unshaken, walked in and viciously kicked the torn body of the undercover man. He cursed over his own snap judgment in taking in a new man whose record hadn't been personally vouched for by some one he knew.

All in all, though, the big boss felt fairly good. Only for the wily Sam, who had lured the government men into the trap, the man who called himself Slinger might have slipped away within a day or so and tipped off the law hounds.

The big boss took charge of things like a competent executive, snapped quick commands. Pug and Booter were to get the bodies of the two Federals, killed behind the hedge, into the house at once. Red, who probably would be the boss's aid now that Sam was gone, was to run out the light truck and start the motor.

By turning off the ignition and then switching it on before the engine came to a stop, it could be made to backfire; the unburned gases collected in the muffler would cause the sharp, shotlike reports. All this would be good camouflage in case any one who heard the shooting snooped around to ask questions.

The big boss was still calm as he looked at the body of Sam. Sam had been a clever lieutenant, wily and game, but Sam was of no more use now. The boss was more disturbed over Tubby, who had been badly wounded but had a chance to live.

One of the mob was a "cokey" and had the needle and "the stuff" handy, and Tubby was given a jab to ease his pain. Then, the bodies of the Federals were carried in and dropped on the floor, like so much cordwood.

The big boss was preparing a quick get-away for himself and his men. Since a Federal had managed to worm his way into the mob, things were getting too hot in Chicago. The gang needed new headquarters, and the big boss, a resourceful man, knew just where to find them.

LESS than an hour later, a light truck rumbled along the road into Chicago. It was preceded by a black sedan, which hung quite close.

A crudely lettered sign on the truck

told the public what the vehicle was. It read:

A. MANGASARIAN,
Oriental and Domestic Rugs;
Rugs Renovated and Repaired.

As a matter of fact, there were four large rugs on the truck. They were not Oriental rugs; they were the cheapest of the cheap, and had been hastily removed from the rural hide-out.

They were rolled up, inside out. Each one was rolled about the body of a man. For the hide-out had been stripped of everything incriminating. If any one prowled through it now, there would be no trace of the gang, and certainly dead men couldn't be left there.

Most of the mob were in the sedan with the wounded Tubby, who would be dropped off at the home of a doctor who knew how to keep his mouth shut, for he didn't want it shut for all time.

Lou and Red and the big boss were on the truck. All had slipped dusty overalls on over their suits. They would pass for workmen. They were not furtive in their movements. They could drive through traffic with this camouflaged load of dead men.

"You sure that dock watchman can be fixed, boss?" Red asked.

"He'll be O. K. I'll slip him a C note. Later, he can say he went over for a sandwich and a cup of coffee. That'll alibi him, all right."

Red, an expert on motors, drove the truck. The boss sat beside him. Lou had been detailed to lie on the rolled-up rugs, like a workman who wouldn't scorn to snatch a quick doze between jobs. He looked far from comfortable. His manner was not lost on the big boss.

Lou had turned out yellow, a guy who'd squawk if he got in a jam. Probably he was laying plans to get through with this mob before long. He could not sense that it wouldn't be long at all before he would be through with them.

The truck rumbled along for the better part of half an hour. Then Red turned down a thoroughfare that led to the water front. The rank smell of water—water that was not salt but certainly was far from fresh—tainted the air. The screen of fog had lifted slightly, but there were still patches of mist.

THE truck halted about fifty yards from a wharf that was seemingly deserted. But after a moment, a watchman in stained trousers and sweater emerged from the gloom. The big boss slipped from the truck, walked toward the watchman. There was a brief consultation.

At the end of it, the watchman left the wharf and walked toward the greasy lights of an all-night coffeepot lunch room up the street. The boss ran back to the truck. "O. K., boys. Sure them rugs are lashed down tight?"

"Just tried 'em, boss," Lou said. "Tight as a drum."

Red stood in front of the truck. He had the iron crank in his hand. He and the boss exchanged meaning glances.

"Turn it over, Lou," the boss ordered. "You're a big, strong guy."

Lou walked out in front of the truck. Red stepped aside, crashed the iron down on Lou's skull. Lou pitched to the ground.

Red and the big boss picked up his unconscious form, wedged it tightly under the rolled-up rugs on the truck.

"He'll ride, all right," the big boss said.

"He'll ride on a through ticket," Red said.

The pair laughed at the joke.

"All right. I'll watch at this end. You drive it," the boss ordered.

Red turned the engine over, climbed into the seat, put the car in gear. He turned onto the wharf, stopped a few yards from the stringpiece, but let the

motor run as he peered ahead into the gloom.

Then he shifted into first, pulled out the throttle. The truck whined and growled like some iron monster, then slipped ahead.

Red gauged the distance to the edge of the wharf. Then, with a quick movement, he opened the throttle wider, and leaped. The truck shot ahead, plunged into the black waters, disappeared beneath the oily surface.

The disturbed waters gradually settled. Red ran back to the side of the big boss.

"O. K.?" the boss asked.

"O. K."

"Fair enough. Let's scram. But listen, Red. We won't get any better place to make a set-up than right here. You got lots of sugar on you?"

Red grinned. "I can always use a little more, boss."

"O. K. Here!"

The big boss fished in his pockets, brought out four fifty-dollar bills.

"Here's a couple of C's. You get that rattler going out West to-night. These Feds are too hot in this burg. We'll use the Arizona layout. Get that rattler out to-night!"

"How about the rest of the mob?"

"I'll fix that end. I'll meet you at the Patio Hotel in Tucson next Wednesday. The mob will be with me. We can go to the river from there."

Red tucked the bills into his pocket.

"I got you, boss," he said. "Me for the wide, open spaces!"

CHAPTER III.

THE FATE OF JIM TECUMSEH.

THE lean six-foot figure of Sheriff "Pistol Pete" Rice detached itself from the group in front of the Buzzard Gap, Arizona, courthouse. Trials, and especially trials for killing, always attracted a big crowd to the county seat.

This coming trial promised to be a bigger-than-average attraction. Citizens felt strongly moved about it. As he started down toward the jail, Pete Rice could hear even the mild-mannered Sam Hollis saying: "The rope'd be too good for him! He ought to be staked out on a nest o' sidewinders!"

Hollis and others were discussing the defendant, a half-breed Indian generally known as Jim Tecumseh. As his long legs moved toward the jail to get Tecumseh, Pete Rice ran over the details of the murder.

Three riders from the Trailing Crescent spread—the property of Calvin Smeed, over near Agua Fria—had heard screams as they rode past the small ranch of John Carroll on their way home from town one night.

They had investigated. They had found John Carroll dead on the floor, with an ugly wound in his throat. His wife, Anna, was dying; in fact, died before she could give any satisfactory account of what had heppened.

She had mentioned "Jim" and it was believed that she meant Jim Tecumseh, the single employee of the spread, whom the cowboys found hiding in an upstairs closet, quivering with fear.

Jim Tecumseh had protested his innocence, saying he had heard intruders come in, kill the rancher and his wife, then leave in a hurry when they heard the Trailing Crescent riders gallop up. Jim had kept himself hidden, he claimed, because he had thought the Trailing Crescent riders were the robbers returning to finish their job.

Sheriff Pete Rice had been summoned and had arrested Jim Tecumseh. The sheriff had examined the tracks about the house and had found nothing much to work on. He had managed to save Tecumseh from a threatened lynching when the news of the double murder had spread across the county with the rapidity of a brush fire. He had

guarded the half-breed carefully until the day set for trial.

As Pete passed a lunch room on the main street of Blizzard Gap, a slight man of small stature ran out. "Hey, Pete! I'll mosey down to the hoosegow with you," he called.

He was "Misery" Hicks, the town barber and also one of Pete Rice's trusted deputies. He quickened his pace to keep up with the long-legged Pete Rice.

"You countin' on any trouble at the trial, Pete?" Misery asked.

Pete Rice shook his head. His angular jaws were working on a wad of chewing gum. "I don't reckon there'll be any trouble, Misery. It's up to us to see that there ain't."

They cut over through an alley, entered the jail and walked toward the cell block. Before one of the cells they halted.

"Come on, Jim," Pete said to the prisoner. "We'll get this over fast."

THE thin-shouldered man standing against the far wall turned his head. His eyes were pools of fathomless black. No one knew much about the origin of Jim Tecumseh, except that John Carroll had sworn by him. It was Carroll who had changed his unpronounceable tribal name to Jim Tecumseh.

Pete and Misery guided their prisoner, unshackled, toward the courthouse. Jim wore a pair of torn, faded blue jeans, a soiled flannel shirt, a pair of cowman's boots, probably cast-offs of his late employer, and a battered, black slouch hat. He was the calmest man in all that Main Street crowd.

He did not seem worried over the boos and catcalls, the epithets hurled at him by loungers along the street. Nor did Pete Rice bother with the abusive men. The latter would naturally be aroused. Old John Carroll and his wife had been foully murdered—at least this was the assumption—by a man they had trusted and protected. Pete believed that shouting their sentiments might prove a harmless outlet for the enraged citizens.

There were many strangers in town, and apparently one of these strangers mistook Pete's judgment and tolerance for weakness. He lurched from the gallery of the Punchers' Rest, a well-patronized saloon on Main Street, and grasped the thin shoulder of the prisoner.

"You danged murderin' breed!" he grated, as he raised his other fist. "I'm just goin' to——"

He was whisked through the air by Pete Rice as a teacher might handle a naughty schoolboy. The sheriff's big hand had him by the collar.

"Keep your hands off that prisoner!" Pete snapped.

"He killed the Carrolls, didn't he?"

"That ain't been proved yet. Get out o' here—pronto!"

Pete released the puncher. But the puncher, instead of heading back toward the saloon gallery, made a lunge toward Pete. His fist was drawn back. It was sweeping forward.

Crack! Pete Rice's big fist caught the disturber on the point of the jaw, sent him to the plank sidewalk.

"One more yawp out o' you, an' you get slung into the hoosegow!" he warned.

The fellow continued to lie on the sidewalk, for Pete Rice hit hard. But another man, in puncher's clothes, walked up to Pete.

"Give him a chance, will you, sheriff?" he pleaded. "He's with us. We've all been drinkin', but I reckon it's gotten him the worst. He's a good hombre. Whisky's about his only fault."

"That an' foolishness, I reckon," Pete amended. "Even whisky has its legitimate uses. It's whisky an' a fool that makes a bad combination. Seems like

some men are so foolish that if whisky'd make their brain clear an' intelligent instead o' stupefied, they'd find somethin' else to drink."

He looked down at the bleary-eyed cowboy. "This ranny's strange around here. Where's he from?"

"He's from my country—down Hondo way. We drifted in with some beefs, then reckoned we'd stay for the trial when we heard about the excitement. We knew John Carroll a few years ago."

"Well," Pete told him, "this is a public trial. Nothin' against anybody attendin'—anybody that behaves himself. Better get your pard some black coffee."

He signaled to Misery Hicks, and the pair of them proceeded along toward the courthouse with their prisoner between them. As they walked along the corridor, Judge Grange was just turning into the courtroom. The case was about to begin. This very day, Buzzard Gap would learn whether Jim Tecumseh was to live or to die.

FORMALITIES were disposed of quickly. Judge Grange was an efficient jurist, even if, like Pistol Pete Rice, he sometimes had original ideas about law. If he ever erred—and there was no proof that he did—it was on the side of mercy.

The three witnesses, the punchers from the Trailing Crescent spread, testified to what they had seen and heard at the Carroll spread on the night of the double murder. Their story was already known to most of the folks in the courtroom. On cross-examination they were firm. It could be sensed that they hoped Jim Tecumseh would swing, but it was also clear that they were simple, honest fellows who were telling the exact truth.

When Jim Tecumseh, the defendant, took the stand, there was a quick sound of buzz and chatter; then, as Judge Grange gaveled his desk sharply, a hush settled over the room.

Pete sat close to the half-breed. He was ready to act at the first gesture of hostility. He would have done so even if he had known the man to be guilty, for protecting prisoners was part of the duties of Pete Rice's office. And, somehow, he doubted that Jim Tecumseh was guilty.

His imprisonment and trial seemed a great deal of a mystery to the half-breed. He appeared to be in a daze over the tragedy that had swooped down on the peaceful little Carroll spread. That this attitude could be assumed was not overlooked by Pete Rice. And yet the defendant was not the acting kind.

The defense attorney, retained by some well-to-do Indians of the tribe from which the defendant sprang, was able to do little if anything for the half-breed.

This was thought unusual, too, for the defense attorney was no less a figure than Sharon Pell, of Mesa Ridge. Pell was a crook, shyster, trickster. But he was a clever lawyer, and he seldom failed to clear a man able to pay his price.

This time, however, his prepared questions brought practically no response from his client. Jim Tecumseh was apathetic. He answered mainly by shakes of the head—at the most, by monosyllables. No lawyer, not even the tricky Sharon Pell, could do much with the bewildered Jim Tecumseh.

The prosecuting attorney, also, was unable to change the complexion of the case by his attempts at browbeating, and finally Judge Grange lifted a warning finger.

"It looks to me, Ed," he said, unceremoniously addressing the prosecuting attorney by his first name, "as if all this won't get us anywhere. This prisoner *is* unusual. This case *is* unusual. We might do great injustice by treating it in just a usual way."

The jurist turned to the defendant. "Jim," he said, informally, "nobody's trying to say you killed anybody if you didn't. You understand that, don't you?"

FOR the first time, the half-breed responded—slightly, at least. He understood straight, plain talk. "I understand. You good man," he said.

Judge Grange flushed up, and gaveled his desk sharply as the crowd broke into a laugh.

"Now, all we want here is the truth, Jim," he went on. "If you committed this crime, you just can't escape. If you didn't, if you got anything to say that may prove you didn't, come right out with it."

Jim nodded. "I tell you, or I tell Pete Rice. Pete Rice fair man. I know he catch outlaw killer, make swing if guilty, help if not guilty."

For the first time, responding perhaps to what he sensed as kindness and fairness, Jim Tecumseh was talking with some coherence.

"I no steal," he went on. "I no kill. I no afraid death come. John Carroll, my friend, dead. Then Jim Tecumseh feel just like dead inside."

His simple, direct statements were swaying the courtroom. There seemed some doubt in that big audience now as to whether Jim Tecumseh had killed his employer, after all.

"I no talk before," Jim continued, "because I feel good as dead man. Even my lawyer, he tell me private that not much chance. He say I get hold two hundred more dollar, hand it to him, maybe I got better chance."

The courtroom rocked with laughter, and Sharon Pell, the lawyer, made a gesture of extreme annoyance.

"That claim is ridiculous, of course, your honor," he put in.

Judge Grange did not answer him. Instead, he said to the defendant: "Now, you needn't tell anything about the talk between you and your lawyer, Jim. What we want to get at is facts about this murder. I'll try and piece up this crime as it happened, according to your story. Then, when I'm finished, you tell me whether it's true or not. Understand, Jim?"

"I understand."

"All right. John Carroll and his wife were in the front room of the ranch house when somebody came in. You don't know who it was. You don't even know whether they walked or rode. You didn't hear any horse's hoofs."

He was repeating the story originally told by Jim. Jim shook his head vehemently.

"All right. But you heard a scream later. Then you ran in and found Mr. Carroll with a knife wound in his throat, and he was dead at that time, you thought. Mrs. Carroll was dying."

"Like you say," Jim Tecumseh agreed. "Just like you say."

"All right. Mrs. Carroll pointed to the back room which was entered by another door than the one you came through. You started to go in there after the person you thought killed your employers; then you heard the riders coming.

"You did not know that these riders were Trailing Crescent hands attracted by the scream. You believed them to be the killers returning. Believing yourself helpless against these odds, you ran and hid, and that is where the Trailing Crescent men found you."

"It is so," Jim Tecumseh said. "But you leave out one thing."

"What was that, Jim?" the judge asked. He leaned over the bench. There was an expression of eagerness on his rugged old face.

"You leave out—about me, Jim Tecumseh, when I—when I go to door and——"

His voice seemed to grow thick. He got up from the witness chair, tried to take a deep breath.

"When I go to door, and look in—and see——"

Again he struggled for breath.

Pistol Pete Rice had risen, was striding over close to the defendant. "Go on, Jim," he said, sharply. "What did you see? Get it out fast!" It was nothing unusual for Pete Rice to take liberties in court when Judge Grange was on the bench.

The half-breed coughed. His thin, brown hand came up, seemed to caress the scrawny length of throat showing above the soiled flannel shirt. He sat down quickly, as if he might be weak.

"Jim no kill his boss, no kill his friend," he managed to say between gasps. "Jim—good Indian. Me—Jim Tecumseh——"

He slipped from the chair to the floor.

PETE RICE leaned over him, loosened his shirt band. The half-breed's eyes were closed. Pete put his hand on the left side of Jim's chest.

There was no heart action. Pete Rice's gaunt face went tense. A thought had hurtled through his brain like a flaming meteor through the sky.

He turned away from the half-breed, and his keen, gray eyes swept about the courtroom. Apparently he did not see the persons he wanted to see there, for disappointment showed in his face.

He happened to catch the eye of Misery Hicks, and beckoned the little barber-deputy. Misery came running to his side.

"Get outside quick, pard!" Pete ordered in a low tone. "Get hold o' that hombre that grabbed Jim by the shoulder. Get hold o' any o' his pards, too. I'll be with you—pronto."

The courtroom was in a turmoil. Men were springing up from their seats. Judge Grange was roaring for order. Attendants hustled about, insisting upon silence. Pete Rice ripped open the back of Jim Tecumseh's shirt and examined the dead man's shoulder.

Doctor Buckley, coroner of Trinchera County, had passed up the center aisle, was kneeling beside the dead man.

"Might possibly have been a heart condition," he said to Pete. "Probably aggravated by fear or excitement, or it might have been——"

But Sheriff Pistol Pete Rice had already started for the door in the wake of his deputy, Misery Hicks.

The diagnoses of Doctor Buckley were usually right. But here was one case, Pete decided, in which Buckley was wrong.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BAITED TRAP.

PETE RICE raced out into the street and swiveled his glance in all directions. But the main street seemed practically deserted. Almost every person in Buzzard Gap was in the courtroom or in the crowd that milled about the entrance.

Pete saw Misery Hicks running out of the Punchers' Rest Saloon. Misery shook his head at his boss, indicating that the men sought were not in the saloon, and then darted into a near-by restaurant.

For fifteen minutes or so, Pete and his deputy fine-combed the town. Misery looked in all stores—the saloons first. Pete took up a stand near the courthouse and watched the crowd coming out, now that the case had ended so dramatically.

The sheriff also asked every man who had been on the street if he had seen any riders heading out of town within the past hour.

Hank Parsons, the butcher, had seen three men riding out of town to the south, just when the trial had started. Hank could give only a general description of them. They had worn cowpunchers' clothing. There was no guarantee that they were the three men Pete Rice wanted, but the sheriff decided to take a chance.

He ordered Misery Hicks to get the horses ready and get a pair of rifles and sufficient ammunition. He then ran up to the undertaking shop where the body of Jim Tecumseh had already been taken.

Doctor Buckley was just starting to make a preliminary examination. An autopsy would be performed later.

The coroner looked up as Pete entered. "I've changed my opinion since I looked over this body closer," he announced. "Jim wasn't hardly the type for heart trouble." Although a good physician and a better-than-average surgeon, Doctor Buckley used the rather careless vernacular of the section. "Injuns rarely have heart trouble; that's the white man's burden—from bad, unnatural livin'."

"Doctor," Pete Rice said, "I never discussed thin's like this with you, because I don't know much about 'em. But I've got an idea Jim was poisoned!"

Buckley stared at the sheriff. "O' course, it *could* be poison," he conceded. "The sudden excitement brought on by the questioning might drive his heart faster, would bring things to a quicker climax. That might be why he went over right when he was on the point o' givin' important information."

"Look at Jim's shoulder, will you, doctor?" Pete said.

The corpse had been lying face up. It had not been stripped of clothes as yet. Buckley turned over the body. Pete ripped the back of the shirt down farther.

DOCTOR BUCKLEY'S eyes narrowed. He tipped his graying head closer. His skilled fingers touched the brown skin lightly, as a master musician might caress a fine instrument.

"By golly!" he exclaimed. "You hit it, Pete! There's just a small, red spot here, practically a dot. With Jim's reddish-brown skin, it's almost unnoticeable. How did you get that hunch, Pete?"

The sheriff explained briefly. "When Misery an' me was bringin' Jim to the courthouse, I didn't figure there'd be any trouble other than public feelin'. I couldn't see why any jasper'd want to murder Jim. But somebody *did* want to—somebody that aimed to close Jim's mouth!"

"But how in the world——" Buckley started to ask.

"Pricked him in the shoulder—with some sort o' hollow needle containin' poison!" Pete cut in. He gave brief details about the apparently half-drunken fellow who had grabbed the prisoner by the shoulder.

Doctor Buckley examined the small bruise on the dead man's shoulder again, and nodded his head. "It's murder, then," he said.

"Murder!" Pete repeated grimly. "An' I'm gettin' the killer before he puts too much dirt between Buzzard Gap an' himself!"

He ran out of the establishment and made for Misery Hicks's barber shop on the main street. His own official headquarters were in the rear of the barber shop.

Misery already had two horses saddled and bridled at the hitch rack. They were his own hardy little steeldust and Pete Rice's magnificent sorrel, Sonny.

From down the street, Pete could see that Misery was talking with Sam Hollis, proprietor of the local feed store, and patting the big head of the sheriff's dog, Vulcan, an English mastiff that had been a gift to Pete and which he frequently took along with him on the trail.

Sam Hollis was facing toward Pete, yet apparently did not see the sheriff coming. But Vulcan, the mastiff, sensed the nearness of his master. He bounded up the street, leaped up at Pete and tried to lick his face. The little deputy's badge, dangling from his spiked

collar in place of a license tag, jingled musically. At the same time Sonny, the slender-limbed sorrel, raised his head and whickered out a welcome to his master.

Misery turned and waved at his chief. A moment or so later, when Pete came up, the little deputy motioned to the rifle in each saddle, sheathed lock forward and stock down, then to the full supply of ammunition he carried in his cartridge belt. "All ready, boss!" he reported.

"Where you bound for, Pete?" Sam Hollis asked.

Pete hesitated, then decided to tell Hollis, one of his oldest friends.

Sam's face grew dark and tense with indignation. "An' I was one o' the fools as thought this poor Jim Tecumseh was guilty all the time!" he said.

"Lots thought so," Pete told him, "but there was somethin' bigger than that back o' the murder o' Mr. an' Mrs. Carroll."

"Where's Teeny?" Hollis asked, with apparent irrelevance. He referred to "Teeny" Butler, Pete Rice's other deputy.

"Teeny loped over Rangerville way, to look over some brands that didn't seem to shape up right. Why?"

"You was sayin' there was three o' them c'yotes," Sam replied. "Mind if I ride along with you?"

"Not if your hoss is handy," Pete told him. "We ain't losin' another minute."

"You won't have to lose another second!" Hollis yelled as he ran diagonally across the street, then leaped astride a big black stallion which had been standing there. "I'm right with you, boys!"

THE two lawmen and their friend rode hard, and kept going—except for an occasional stop at a ranch house, where Pete Rice inquired if three riders had been seen passing, and how long before.

Most of the men at the ranches, which were in rather thick clusters in this particular section, had seen the three men, who had been pelting along fast.

The news encouraged Pete Rice. He was glad to learn that the three horsemen had been riding fast. He had no proof that they were the three horsemen he wanted, but when each of his inquiries brought a response that the riders were "sure high-tailin' it some," then it was a fair chance that the three were the guilty men.

At a point several miles south of Buzzard Gap, the tracks showed that the three fugitives—and Pete was absolutely convinced now that they were fugitives—had cut off sharply to the east, in order to get away from the traveled roads.

The chase might develop into a ride of several hours, The tracks were clear enough; the only chance was that the fugitives might make the Border. Even that would not stop Pete Rice, but there would be technicalities, and there would be delay.

Pete and his men rode fast, but that did not keep them from talking. Sam Hollis was particularly eager for action. He was obviously feeling ashamed of his snapshot judgment of earlier in the day.

"I reckon I let my feelin's run away with my brains, Pete," he said, as he galloped along. "You see, me an' the Carrolls was right good friends. I knew John when he didn't have ten dollars in the world. He had a gift for makin' money, John did. Folks called him lucky."

"He must be more than that," was Pete Rice's opinion. "A part of every man's success might be due to luck, but all the other parts are due to good sense an' ability."

"Lots o' folks reckoned Carroll was a little tight with money," Misery Hicks put in.

"They was right there," Hollis con-

ceded. "Old John was a tough hombre in a business deal; I got reason to know. An' yet there was somethin' likable about John, an' as for his wife—well, she was just a saint. Folks don't come any better!"

While Misery Hicks and Sam Hollis discussed the Carrolls, Pete Rice was thinking back to the dramatic scene in the courtroom.

He was wondering if the wily, unprincipled Sharon Pell, the Mesa Ridge attorney, had been in on the deal to shut Jim Tecumseh's mouth by death.

Pell might have advised his client not to tell anything until arraigned in court. This might have accounted for Jim's silence while he was lodged in jail. Pell might have been in the pay of the enemy, the very men who had poisoned Jim. And, knowing that Jim had been poisoned on his way to trial, Pell might have purposely spun out his preliminary address to the jury, in order that the poison would have time to take effect before Jim would get a chance to testify.

All this was conjecture. Pete meant to look into the matter. He would not have put anything beyond Sharon Pell—Sharon Pell who made more in a month defeating the ends of justice than Pete Rice made in a year as sheriff.

Yet despite the difference in income, Pete Rice would rather have been sheriff, riding the hard trails, riding, as now, to possible death, than that low creature who made a mockery of the law.

The trail swung through a section thickly covered with trees, then made a sharp turn south again. The grama grass started to thin out. Cactus and mesquite began to appear.

Yet they were still some distance from the desert proper, and soon descended into a valley bright with alfilaria. There had been plenty of rain recently, and the country bloomed. Here and there in the chaparral were florescent buckthorn and manzanita. Far ahead, the jig-saw pattern of the desert mountain range stood out clearly.

"Right nice country," Sam Hollis remarked.

Pete nodded. "Yep. An' when country gets as pretty as this, a hombre seldom finds it entirely deserted. There'll be some camps before long."

HIS prophecy proved correct only a few minutes later. It was the kind of trail which snaked around boulders, climbed hills and shot down into valleys. Often, in fact, the riders could not see any one who might be as little as a hundred yards ahead of them. But switching to the west, to skirt a line of rocks, Vulcan began to bark eagerly and look up at Pete.

The sheriff's hand went to his holster. "Careful, boys!" he cautioned. He knew that Vulcan never made mistakes.

In spite of his warning, Sam Hollis, gun in hand, spurred his stallion around the rocks, and Pete quickly overtook him on Sonny. Misery, on his steeldust, was only a length behind. As usual, he was eager for action.

But there was a let-down in tension when it was discovered that a pair of harmless-looking burros was the reason for Vulcan's bark. They were picketed just beyond the line of rocks, and a few yards to the east were two men—obviously prospectors—who were crouched in a small hollow.

One of them, surly and unshaven, stepped out from behind the small hollow. He carried a rifle. "What you want?" he demanded of the horsemen.

Pete saw at once that the fellow was not a criminal; he was the type to shoot if not quickly calmed.

"The first thing is: To put down that rifle, pard," he answered. "I'm Sheriff Rice. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

The rifle tipped down quickly. The rifleman, closely followed by his part-

ner, walked over in front of Sonny. A grin split his whisker-spiked face.

"That's different," he said. "I've heard a heap about your doin's from time to time, sheriff. We was just bein' cautious, Flapjack an' me was. We was bein' careful against gettin' victimized again."

"Victimized?" Pete repeated. "What happened?"

"Well, we fed three rannies that hit us for grub a spell ago. An' while we was rustlin' up the food, danged if one o' 'em didn't snag a small poke o' dust that my pard Flapjack here had hid away! That's gratitude, ain't it?"

"Three men?"

"Three bein's what 'u'd call 'emselves men, I reckon."

"How long have they been gone?"

"Just about half an hour; maybe not quite that much."

Pete Rice's face fell into grim lines. "Good! Then they won't have time to make the Border. We're after them three men, an' maybe we'll have the pleasure o' handin' that poke o' dust back to you."

He spurred Sonny, who shot forward like a red comet.

His two companions spurred their mounts and managed to cling a few lengths to the rear.

The fugitives could not make the Border. There was bound to be action.

MISERY HICKS'S Irish-blue eyes were alight with excitement, and Sam Hollis, too, was eager to clash with the killers who had done for Jim Tecumseh, the unfortunate half-breed he had misjudged so badly.

"I'd give half my business if we could catch up with them fellers," Sam said with fervor as the three galloped south. "But they must have good hosses, Pete, an', after all, they have half an hour's start on us. If they make the Border——"

"They can't make the Border," Pete cut in. "We've caught up on 'em a lot. Their hosses are tirin'. An' right soon we'll be in flatter country where we can see 'em in the distance."

"Reckon they'll fight?" Misery asked eagerly.

"Possibly," Pete answered, "as soon as they see they ain't outnumbered. An' yet they can't be too anxious for a fight, or they'd 've made a stand before this."

The sheriff's angular jaws moved up and down on his chewing-gum. "Seems to me the best way to learn about others is to study ourselves. Now, what 'u'd *we* do in their place if we saw some one hot on our tails?"

He answered his own question. "Seems like we'd try some kind o' trickery, don't it? We'd try to work some sort o' stall. Reckon that's what they'll do. We want to keep our eyes open for that."

The grama grass was gradually petering out. Desert terrain stretched out ahead. But the northern edge of this particular expanse of desert was rimmed by deep, boulder-crested canyons and winding arroyos, and still the lawmen could not catch sight of their quarry.

They got a glimpse of them for the first time when they galloped through an arroyo, the high banks of which were fringed with desert willows, green-topped mesquite and paloverde. But almost immediately the fugitives disappeared into a sort of canyon and were lost to sight again.

Pete Rice was chewing gum and thinking rapidly. Within four or five miles this rocky country would come to an end. Killers and pursuers would then be in a flat, sandy country, a gray and melancholy waste of low mesquite and greasewood brush. Many chances to one, the sheriff decided, the killers would make some sort of stand before them.

Pete's smoky-gray eyes were trained ahead on the walls of the canyon. He hauled down Sonny and motioned to his

companions to ease the gait of their mounts.

"Easy, boys," he advised. "There may be a reception committee waitin' for us behind them rocks ahead there. We'll veer over to the right."

He guided them to the right, where if shots came from the canyon, he and his men would take advantage of the cluster of high boulders. They were within a few paces of the boulders and perhaps a hundred yards from the canyon, when a hail came from their quarry. A man was standing on one of the canyon walls.

"Hey, there!" he yelled out. "What you want, hombres? You seem to be ridin' right hard. Did you want to parley with us?"

PETE neckreined Sonny into the shelter of the high boulders, motioned his companions to follow suit with one hand.

"We sure do!" Pete called back. "I'm Sheriff Rice. I'm orderin' you to come out from shelter there—an' with your paws up!"

The man on the canyon wall hesitated. Then: "We ain't rightly sure who you are, hombre. There's some tough rannies in this section. We ain't doin' no harm, but we don't want to be tricked. You toss down your guns—an' *we* will. Then we can talk things over."

"You're talkin' on our terms," Pete shot back. "Come out! No stallin'!"

The man on the wall stooped and conferred with his companions down in the canyon. Then another man climbed up beside him on the low wall. Both put up their hands.

"You got us all wrong," the original spokesman called out. "If you're the sheriff, you must have us mixed up with some other fellers. Here! Two of us has got our paws up. Ride into the end o' the canyon so we can see you up close. If you're the sheriff, we'll talk things over, an' glad to do it."

Pete Rice considered. Disappointment showed on his gaunt face. Were he and his companions trailing the wrong men? Could there be some mistake?

"You get your third man up on that wall," he ordered. "Then we'll ride in."

"Nope! We got *some* rights! You come ahead. You'll find us O. K., if you're what you represent yourself to be. You still got your guns on, an' we ain't. We want one o' our men under cover in case o' treachery."

Pete Rice wanted no more delay. If he had been trailing the wrong men, better to know it at once. If these fellows planned trickery, they seemed in a tough spot. Two of them were on the wall and had their hands up. Their holsters were empty, and Pete and his men were fully armed.

"All right, then," the sheriff conceded. "If there's any reachery, it'll be on your part. An' it'll be the saddest piece o' treachery you ever pulled. I'm tellin' you!"

He led the way toward the mouth of the canyon. He was holding Sonny back with a tight rein. He saw the lips of one of the men on the wall move slightly, as if giving some instruction to his hidden companion.

At the same moment the eager Sam Hollis and the always-eager Misery spurred their mounts. They shot ahead of Pete, were almost at the mouth of the canyon. Vulcan, the mastiff, also leaped ahead, then stopped short, growled sharply, and looked back at Pete.

"Easy, boys!" Pete called out. "Rein up there!"

Misery Hicks, used to taking orders, pulled his steeldust to a sliding halt in the sand. But the undisciplined Sam Hollis kept riding ahead. Vulcan whined again, then took after him.

Some sixth sense warned Pistol Pete Rice that everything was not as it should be. He yelled at the headlong Sam, and

reached for his lariat. But Sam had already spurred his horse around the bend into the canyon. Vulcan was a few paces behind him.

Pete's big hand whipped his lariat from the sheath in his saddle. With lightning speed he shook out a loop. Between two pulsebeats the rope swished out.

At the same instant there was a tremor of the ground beneath him. It rocked and boiled, as though stirred by some restless underground giant.

Rocks erupted into the air, and there was a detonation that sounded like the reports of a thousand rifles.

The two men who had been on the wall had leaped back into the shallow canyon, and Pete could see fragments of Sam Hollis's horse sailing up through the air like leaves in a storm.

CHAPTER V.

LEAD VERSUS DYNAMITE.

THE loop of Pete's lariat dropped squarely over the big head of Vulcan. Pete spurred Sonny into a series of quick leaps, and managed to drag the mastiff away from the shower of rocks. But rifles were now spanging from the canyon, and lead whizzed close to Pete before he had yanked the dog into the shelter of the high boulders at the right.

Misery Hicks had also spurred his steeldust back of the boulders, and his .45s were in his hands. He was snapping quick shots into the canyon.

Pete was off his horse in a jiffy. He drew the loop from Vulcan's head, ordered him to lie down in the shelter of the boulders. Except for occasional moments of quick excitement, Vulcan took orders like a deputy.

The sheriff was peering over one of the boulders. It was Misery's nature to shoot fast and furiously, whether he could see a target or not. But the cooler-headed Pete Rice waited until the screen of dust and fragments rose like some great stage curtain.

His heart felt like lead. Sam Hollis was one of his oldest friends. It was too much to believe that Sam could have escaped death in that terrific explosion.

The one single ray of hope was that Sam had seen the sputtering fuse and, unable to haul down his powerful stallion, had slipped to the ground. The fact that only the fragments of the horse had been seen in the air gave some strength to this desperate hope.

But even so, Sam could hardly have escaped. If not caught in the blast itself, he must have been crushed by the shower of rocks.

There was a snarl on Misery's face as he snapped a triplet of shots at the high crown of a sombrero poked above the canyon rocks for just an instant.

Pete was still trying to figure things out. He would have charged into the canyon immediately, if it were not for the danger that the killers might have mined it for a second blast. It was not probable, but it was possible.

The killers must have taken some time to arrange that first blast. They had spotted the lawmen riding from the north, had arranged their crimpered dynamite and fuse, and then had tried to stall about a "parley."

While two of them stood on the wall, unarmed and with their hands up, the third man down in the canyon had touched off the fuse just as Pete and his men had started to ride into the canyon.

The killers had arranged to be in a safe spot. But if Pete had not strongly suspected something wrong, it was certain that he and his men would by now be dead or badly injured.

Misery was crouched against a boulder with .45s poised. He was looking for possible targets. His blue eyes were blazing.

"What you say, boss?" he asked Pete. "Do we top our hosses an' ride in there?

Looks like we'll never get 'em any other way."

"We won't wait any longer than we have to," Pete told him. "We'll wait till one o' them killers shows the tip o' his hat again. Then we'll both blaze away. We won't get him, I reckon. But we'll make him keep low. An' before he gets up again to see what's what, we'll rush."

AS they waited, he gave definite instructions. They were to leave the horses in the shelter of the high boulders, for the mouth of the canyon was not far away, and they could make it by racing across the short, unsheltered space.

It was possible they could find cover there among the splintered rock, but it was too much to expect that they could find cover for their mounts.

The sweat rolled down the gaunt face of Pete Rice as he waited for some sign of action in the canyon. It was the sweat of worry, of nervousness; he was thinking of Sam Hollis, possibly wounded, lying under débris up in that canyon pass; of Sam Hollis suffering, moaning, wondering where his friends were.

But everything depended on good judgment here; the time to make the rush was after they had fired at the killer; and he had crouched down for a moment.

After what seemed like many minutes—and probably was only a pair of them—the peak of the sombrero showed again above the crest of boulders. There was a quick rifle shot in the direction of Pete and Misery. The lawmen fired wildly, and the sombrero disappeared.

"Now, pard!" Pete whispered.

His long legs raced across the flat expanse toward the mouth of the canyon. Misery's shorter legs worked like pistons as he tried to keep up with his chief. Vulcan whined piteously to go along, but Pete ordered him back with a snapped command.

A shot hummed over Pete's head just as he was turning into the canyon, but in another second he and Misery had dived into the shelter of a pile of rock that had tumbled down from the canyon wall as a result of the explosion.

They were safe for the moment, but Pete's heart thumped as he saw that his friend Sam Hollis was far from safe. The Buzzard Gap feed merchant was lying several yards up the canyon. He was in a position where Pete could not see his face or head, but he could see that his legs were pinned to the ground by a heavy boulder which had been dislodged by the blast.

The walls and floor of the canyon, a number of yards north of where Sam lay, were spattered with the blood and flesh of the horse that had been blown to pieces. Pete's hunch had been correct; Sam must have seen the sputtering fuse and dived from his horse. Whether his quick action had done any good or not remained to be seen.

The sharp cough of rifles sounded up the canyon behind a tower of rock, and Pete ducked quickly as lead spatted against the pile of rock that sheltered Misery and himself.

Misery was eager for action, but Pete whispered a quick warning to the little barber-deputy as his .45 came up. "Wait, pard!" Pete said.

He knew that he and Misery were reasonably well sheltered. But the killers might be impelled to shoot at Sam Hollis if, indeed, they had not done so before. There was still that one outside chance that Sam might be alive. Pete Rice wanted to do nothing to kill that chance.

Pete saw that the blast had ripped a big crack through the west wall of the canyon, a fissure that made a corridor wide enough to pass through for several yards, at least. He believed if he and Misery could get through this passage,

they might be able to climb atop the west wall in such a position that they could cover the hidden killers with their guns. It was worth a try, anyhow.

HE whispered quick instructions to Misery. Then the two of them braced themselves and made for the narrow corridor. A volley of shots came from the hidden killers, but they had been fired without careful aiming, and they went wild. The next instant Pete and Misery were in shelter.

Pete led the way through the passage, which climbed gradually. His pearl-handled .45s were balanced in his big brown hands. The corridor might end suddenly; he might find himself in an exposed position where he would have to fire quickly.

The corridor became so narrow that Pete had to edge his way along sidewise. He had climbed several feet. From the pot-shots that the killers were firing at him, Pete judged that he was already higher than the killers. And suddenly, where the big fissure ended, he found himself on a rickety shelf of rock. He could make out the three men huddled behind boulders and scrub growth over near the east wall.

The killers saw him, and without waiting to fire, scurried for cover. Pete blasted three quick shots. One of the men toppled. He rolled over just once, then lay absolutely quiet.

Misery had not yet come out on the rickety ledge. There had not been room enough to let even his little body squeeze by Pete. And when he did reach the side of his chief, the killers were again under cover.

Pete edged back of a tower of rock, pulled Misery after him. So far, it looked like a drawn battle. On the lawmen's side, Hollis was out of action. On the killers' side, one of their men was gone. Pete was now certain that the outlaw was dead. He lay spread-eagled across the canyon floor.

Pete now had a chance to get a close-range look at Sam Hollis, almost directly beneath the ledge. His heart beat wildly as he saw Sam make a slight move. There was still hope, then, for Sam! And yet Sam must be suffering dreadfully.

Pete forgot his own danger in his concern for his friend, and as he craned his neck from behind the tower of rock, a rifle shot ripped out from cover, and he dodged back quickly. Much as he hated to do so, he would have to let Sam lie down there for the present.

It would take many minutes for both Misery and himself to pry the boulder from Sam's legs. Meanwhile, the lawmen and Sam, too, would make perfect targets for the hidden killers. Pete racked his brain for some quick way to end the battle, so that he could do something for his friend.

And just then the killers decided to end the battle quickly, too.

For something sailed through the air in Pete's direction in a sputtering arc. Pete's attention was still riveted on the helpless Sam below.

"Look *out,* Pete!" Misery yelled frantically.

The next instant the short-fused stick of crimpered dynamite struck the lower part of the ledge.

There was an explosion, but it was not close enough to do more than shake up the lawmen and start their eardrums buzzing.

But the force of the blast hacked away at the base of the rickety ledge, sent Pete Rice toppling down to the floor of the canyon.

CHAPTER VI.

PETE RICE'S HUNCH.

IT was a comparatively short drop, and Pete Rice was quick and agile. He landed on his feet, dived forward as bullets whistled over his head, then found his feet quickly again and

raced down the canyon in a zigzag course.

He did not even turn to snap a return shot. It was not only his own safety that concerned him. He wanted to put space between Sam Hollis and himself.

For the killers must have more dynamite, and if they hurled it at Pete, and it hit close to Sam, there would be no chance whatever for the feed merchant Pete could possibly dodge and duck. Hollis was helpless. He could do nothing.

Pete heard Misery, back on the rear part of the ledge that had not crumbled, firing desperately at the pair of killers who were still in shelter. He heard another blast, and turned to see the ledge disappear completely.

Misery was also sent to the floor of the canyon, but from Pete's position it looked as if the little barber-deputy might have leaped just before the explosive struck. A second later he found this was correct when he saw Misery scrambling down the canyon. Misery was also trying to protect Sam Hollis by putting space between Hollis and himself.

A second later, the tawny form of Vulcan whipped around through the mouth of the canyon. The mastiff was barking furiously. He must have heard Misery's wild, desperate warning to Pete on the ledge, and believed that his master was in trouble. Only a leash—and a strong one, too—could hold Vulcan back from his master in a case like that.

"Down, Vulcan, down!" Pete yelled. He grabbed the mastiff by the collar, dragged him back of the pile of rocks that had tumbled down from the wall—the pile that had served as shelter when he had first entered the canyon—and within seconds Misery was back beside him again.

There was a bad bruise on the little deputy's face as a result of the fall from the ledge, but Misery was as eager for action as ever.

PETE RICE'S mouth was grim. The situation was a most trying one. In ordinary battles, he and Misery could have handled two or three times as many outlaws, and under certain conditions, even more. But Pete was planning his entire campaign for the protection of Sam Hollis.

He was not thinking of himself. If he charged back up the canyon, it was more than a fair chance that outlaw lead would bring him down, and Misery, also. Both were willing to take that chance. But once they were dropped, poor Sam Hollis would die a death of agony.

Misery was looking at his boss eagerly, hopefully. He had little or no sense of danger, was often too headlong, in fact.

"Nothin' to do but take a chance an' rush 'em, Pete, I reckon," he said. "How about it?"

Pete nodded. "When there's only one chance, that's the one to take," he said. "All right. I'll go first. Zigzag, pard."

He raised himself slightly, braced himself, was about to start out from shelter on his desperate mission. And suddenly, up where the outlaws were in hiding, dirt and rock fountained high into the air. There was a screen of débris which clouded the lowering afternoon sun. The terrific report made Vulcan leap nervously from shelter and whine weirdly at the sky.

"By jaspers!" Misery gasped. "I wonder!"

The expression on his wizened little face was almost comical.

Pete Rice, too, seemed flabbergasted. His smoky-gray eyes were wide with wonderment.

"Must be a premature explosion o' that dynamite," he said. "Right odd, too. They seemed mighty savvy rannies, even if they wasn't much else."

He crawled out from behind the shelter. He started running up the canyon with Misery at his heels and Vulcan shooting out ahead of him.

He heard a weak cheer come from the vicinity of the trapped Sam Hollis. He raced to Sam's side. "What happened, Sam, old boy?" he asked. "We're freein' you out o' this pronto, old pard!"

Blended with the expression of agony on Sam's rugged face was a smile of victory. "They reckoned I was a dead man, did they?" he said exultantly. "They did, did they? Well, that sure was their mistake!"

In spite of Pete's plea to remain quiet, Sam explained in jerky sentences. Although the killers had not been visible from the position of Misery and Pete, they had been visible from where Sam lay.

He had seen one of them light the short fuse attached to a stick of dynamite and climb two boulders higher to shoot the piece of destruction in a long arc down the canyon. Although his legs were trapped, Sam's arms were free. He had drawn his .45, and fired.

He believed he had drilled the dynamiter through the stomach. At any rate, the fellow had dropped the fused stick in a crevice between two boulders. An instant later it had "let go." Not only had it killed the two remaining outlaws, but it had buried them—buried them beneath tons and tons of rock.

IT took the better part of half an hour for Pete Rice and Misery Hicks to ease the terrific weight of the boulder from the legs of Sam Hollis. Pete had to rig up an arrangement by which the great weight could be raised gradually—by putting the loop of his lariat around the boulder and then holding the slight gains by snubbing the rope around another boulder nearer the west wall.

When the job was over, the clothes of the lawmen were soaked with sweat, and their faces were wet and glistening. The job had taxed their conditioned bodies, had frazzled their nerves. A piece of bad judgment or a piece of bad luck might easily have resulted in the death of Sam.

The feed merchant showed his mettle once more. He shouted encouragement to his rescuers until unconsciousness mercifully came.

Pete Rice made an examination of Hollis, and shook his head. The left leg had miraculously escaped with bad bruises, but the right leg showed a compound fracture.

The sheriff considered. He had dressed many a wound. But here was a case which would demand the deftest professional skill.

As tenderly as a mother would handle an infant, the heavy form of Sam Hollis was lifted onto the saddle of Pete's sorrel. The sheriff's experienced hands lashed his friend in a way that would make travel as comfortable as possible under the discouraging conditions.

There was a doctor in a little town six miles to the northwest, and Pete took upon himself the job of leading his sorrel across that dismal wasteland while Misery rode as fast as possible to Buzzard Gap to summon Doctor Buckley.

Here was a job that might need all of the mature Buckley's experience as well as that of the young village medico. But before starting, Pete ran back up the canyon and flashed a quick glance at the spot where the crimpered dynamite had "let go."

The destruction had been terrific. Confined in the crevice between two boulders, the dynamite's horrible power had been multiplied. Boulders had been hurled over the west wall of the canyon as if they had been pebbles.

A bloody segment of a forearm was the sole, grisly reminder of the fact that

It took the better part of half an hour for Pete Rice and Misery Hicks to ease the terrific weight of the boulder from the legs of Sam Hollis.

two breathing men had stood on this spot less than half an hour before. The three killers were entombed beneath tons of granite. They had been the cause of Jim Tecumseh's death.

They had sought, also, to send Pete Rice and his two companions after Jim Tecumseh. Retribution had overtaken them. They were dead. They were buried. And the exact position of their bodies—or what remained of them—might never be known.

It was a sober-faced Pete Rice who led his horse out of the cabin for the six-mile trek to the northwest. Sam Hollis was conscious and semiconscious at intervals. Sam would live, but would lie for months on a bed of pain.

In addition, Pistol Pete Rice found himself facing a blank wall. It seemed probable now that he might never unravel the mystery back of the deaths of Jim Tecumseh and the Carrolls.

He had gone into the canyon battle determined not to kill the men who could throw some light upon the mysterious crimes. But fate had stepped in, and not only had killed those men, but had buried them as well.

IT was full dark when Pete Rice led Sonny into the village of Southline, the most southerly settlement of Trinchera County. The injured feed merchant was tenderly lifted into the home of the local doctor, a practitioner young but efficient.

The gaunt sheriff who had faced death countless times, who had campaigned against outlaws with the tactics of a seasoned general, willingly acted as attendant while the youthful surgeon eased Sam's pain with hypodermics and did as much as he could until Doctor Buckley arrived with his case of instruments.

Buckley and Sam Hollis were about the same age, and had been friends since

youth. The doctor's eyes, those eyes which had looked so many times on violent deaths, were sad and a trifle moist as he slid from his tired horse and walked into the house of his Southline confrere.

Although he had conferred with Pete Rice earlier that day and although he was far from a formal man, he shook hands with the sheriff.

"What a day!" he exclaimed. "What a day! Jim Tecumseh killed this mornin'. Rufe Tarrant dead this afternoon. An' now poor old Sam all bunged up!"

"Rufe Tarrant—dead!" Pete gasped. "Why, doctor, I saw Rufe yesterday, comin' out o' the bank!"

"Reckon you did," Buckley conceded. "Rufe looked good for fifteen or twenty years. It wasn't his health. That was all right. But a bullet in the head can let a heap o' life out of a healthy hombre," he added dryly.

As Pete stared, he went on: "I got the word late this afternoon. Jim Carey rode up from Agua Fria way an' carried the news. Looks like old Rufe got tired o' life an' put a bullet in his head."

"You see the body, doctor?" Pete asked in a strange tone of voice.

"Nops. I was just gettin' ready to start for his ranch when Misery rode into the Gap an' told me about Sam. I figured waitin' a little wouldn't hurt a dead man, while it would hurt a man that was ailin' An' I'd ride through hell an' back for Sam Hollis, so I came here first."

The young Southline doctor appeared at the door of his office and beckoned to the surgeon from Buzzard Gap. Buckley nodded, walked into the office. The door closed.

PETE RICE flopped down in one of the reception room easy-chairs. He had seldom felt more fatigued. His gaunt body that so often seemed made of rawhide felt thoroughly spent.

But his brain was racing. Rufus Tarrant a suicide? Not if Sheriff Pete Rice knew men! There were things that certain breeds just did not do. Vulcan would not eat an orange, no matter how hungry he might be. Sonny would not touch meat, even if starving. And old Rufe Tarrant, Pete decided, would never commit suicide.

Tarrant had been in excellent health. He had undergone a thorough examination by Doctor Buckley less than a month before. He loved life. He loved the money that he had been amassing for over forty years. He loved ranching, horse-trading, the thrill of putting over a successful—and sometimes sharp—business deal.

Tarrant had been stingy, grasping. Tarrant murdered—in connection with money—that would be logical enough. Some one might have tried to rob him. Or some one might have held a grudge as a result of one of Rufe Tarrant's sharp business deals.

That some one might have killed Rufe Tarrant. But Tarrant a suicide—that just did not fit into the picture as visualized by Pistol Pete Rice.

And suddenly the fatigue seemed to seep out of the sheriff's gaunt frame. His mind was racing. Didn't it seem odd that John Carroll and Rufe Tarrant, both grasping old ranchers, should have met violent deaths within a few days of each other after having lived in the Agua Fria Valley without harm for years?

Might not there be some connection between the murders?

And Pistol Pete Rice built up many theories, many fancies, as he sat there in the doctor's anteroom, gazing out into the soft Arizona night.

Here might be a clue after all! Only his interest in his friend Sam Hollis kept Pete Rice from running out into the street, hopping into the saddle, and racing his fleet sorrel toward the Tarrant Ranch near Agua Fria.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOTTEST CLUE.

IT was close to midnight when Pistol Pete Rice turned Sonny into the driveway of the Tarrant Ranch near the town of Agua Fria.

In the sheriff's party were Doctor Buckley, Misery Hicks, and Pete's other deputy, Teeny Butler. Like Misery Hicks—who had been baptized Lawrence Michael—Deputy Butler was generally known by his nickname.

He had been christened William Alamo Butler, as he was a descendant of a Texan who had lost his life in defense of the Alamo against the cruel Santa Ana. He weighed almost three hundred pounds, but had the height to carry it.

"Ah'd say there don't seem to be many folks mournin' the loss o' Rufe," he observed in his Texas drawl as he slid his huge bulk from the saddle and gazed toward the darkened ranch house.

"No lights showin' at all," Doctor Buckley remarked. "Rufe had a foreman, didn't he, an' an old Mex housekeeper?"

Pete nodded. "Yep, he called him a foreman. But he was nearer bein' a man-of-all-work. Maybe he's gone to sleep. But he'll probably hear us an' come down."

There was no movement in the darkened house, however. It seemed as if the foreman must be absent. If so, the old Mexican housekeeper would not hear them, for Pete happened to know that the old woman was practically stone deaf. It was said that for years Tarrant had paid her no wages and had only given her what he called "a home."

It took several minutes to awaken the deaf old housekeeper, but this was finally accomplished by lighting lanterns and reflecting the bobbing light in through the windows. The house was a sprawly, cheaply built one-story structure.

A MOMENT or two later the old woman unbolted a door and grinned toothlessly at the callers. Unlike most Mexicans of her class, she was apparently not the least bit superstitious; she was heavy eyed, and had doubtless been sleeping soundly in the room next to where the dead man lay.

She conducted the coroner and the lawmen into the living room. The body of Rufe Tarrant was on the floor in a corner. It had not been touched since first discovered, she claimed. Larry Keeler, the Agua Fria deputy, had called at the house and looked at the corpse that afternoon, but had done nothing but order the housekeeper to lock up the room and allow no one to enter before the coroner came. A .45 Colt was still clutched in Tarrant's right hand.

The coroner had the body removed to the center of the room under the hanging lamp. The most cursory examination was sufficient to prove that, while all this had been arranged to look like a suicide, it was plainly a case of murder.

Buckley turned the body over. "Looks like your hunch was right, Pete," he said. "Look at that bullet hole in his head. Look at the angle o' it. An' then look at the length o' Rufe's arms."

It could be seen that the bullet, almost in the center of the skull, had been fired from the left side, although the gun—with one shell exploded—was held in Rufe's right hand

"Suicide in this case 'u'd be just a physical impossibility," Buckley went on. "This is murder, all right!"

Pete nodded. "An' now the job is to find the murderer," he said.

THE most logical suspect was Cal Nichell, the so-called foreman. The aged housekeeper—who could hear questions if they were shouted into her one fairly good ear—

claimed she had not seen him since the previous night, when he had started out to make a trip, presumably in the interests of his employer.

"You know where he went?" Pete asked in Spanish.

The old woman shook her head. She did not know. Maybe Buzzard Gap, maybe Tucson. She knew that, the day before, Tarrant had drawn a large sum of money from the Buzzard Gap Bank, for she had seen him counting over several bills of large denominations.

A search showed that the large sum was not in the pockets of the dead man. It was possible that Tarrant had sent Nicholl with the money to buy some new stock. And yet it was out of character for the tight-fisted Tarrant to trust any one with a large sum of money.

"When is Nicholl due back here?" Pete shouted at the old woman.

She did not know definitely. But she believed that he would reach Agua Fria on the one o'clock train that morning.

"Only one thing to do, then, doctor," Pete told coroner Buckley. "We'll ride into Agua Fria an' meet that one o'clock train. Seems like the key to this situation is Cal Nicholl. If he can explain everythin', if he has an 'alibi, all right. If he can't, it looks sort o' like trickery somewhere."

But before starting back toward town, Buckley took down a statement from the housekeeper. His examination of the wound showed that the shot must have been fired some time around one o'clock in the morning, but the housekeeper claimed she had heard no noise during the night. She was very deaf, and she was a sound sleeper, she explained.

She had got up to prepare breakfast about six o'clock that morning, then had almost stumbled across the body of her employer. She had waited until a rider was passing, and had told him of the tragedy. That was her complete story.

She told it with the guilelessness of a child. She seemed not the least bit nervous, and her main concern was obviously that now, with her employer dead, she would have to look for a new home.

THE train that drew into the town of Agua Fria at one o'clock that morning discharged three passengers—but Cal Nicholl was not one of them.

This in itself was not necessarily damning to Nicholl; the foreman might have been legitimately delayed in returning from his mission. But a statement of one of Jim Carey's punchers, made a few minutes later in the Agua Fria Saloon, made Pistol Pete Rice as alert as a hound on a hot trail.

The puncher, well loaded with red-eye, was buying a drink for the late saloon stragglers. "Up to the bar, gents," he called. "I'm buyin' a drink for the house." He guffawed drunkenly. "But Cal Nicholl's payin' for it. I just cleaned Cal of a cool hundred simoleons in a poker game last night."

Pete Rice strode over to the puncher. "Where was that poker game last night, hombre?" he asked.

The puncher looked him over blearily. "Well, if it makes any difference, it was right upstairs in this here saloon. Cal had a good roll, an' he reckoned he knew how to play poker. Reckon he knows better now," he added with an exultant shuffle.

"What time was that?" Pete asked.

"Oh, some time before midnight. I cleaned Cal out o' forty iron men, an' still he wanted more punishment. He hires a room, tells me he'll be back in an hour. He does come back—with sixty more bucks. I takes him for that, an' he calls it quits."

Pete's heart was pounding. Then Cal Nicholl had not been on any cattle-buying trip. He had been in Agua Fria playing poker. Around midnight he had quit the game, but had returned with more money about an hour later.

In other words, Cal Nicholl could have had time to return to the Tarrant Ranch, kill old Rufe, rob him, and get back to town shortly after one o'clock! Buckley had believed the murder shot had been fired some time around one o'clock in the morning.

"Have a drink yourself, sheriff?" the half-drunken puncher asked.

"No, thanks," Pete told him.

"This whisky's pretty good stuff, sheriff. Makes a feller feel good. It sure ain't done me no harm—so far."

"Maybe not so far," Pete agreed. "But whisky sort o' changes its feelin' toward you after you know it for a spell. Don't forget, pard, that before the apple incident, the snake was a fairly popular feller in the Garden of Eden."

The cowboy stripped off a ten-dollar bill from a roll. He planked it down on the bar.

"Anybody that's drinkin' can do so now," he yelled, "or forever hold his peace!"

Tim Purley, the bartender, picked up the bill. "Right long time since I seen *you* with big money like this, Lafe," he said to the puncher.

Pete Rice's keen, gray eyes had been trained on the bill. "Let's see that a second, bartender!" he snapped.

He grasped the ten-dollar bill, held it under the light, turned it over, studied it hard for half a moment.

"This ain't such big money, after all—in real value," he said. *"This is a counterfeit ten-dollar bill!"*

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RIVER OF NO RETURN.

THE shock of the announcement almost sobered up the cowboy. "Hell!" he stormed. "So maybe that's why Cal Nicholl lost to me so easylike! If I find he was trickin' me, I'll show him the muzzle of a .45 that ain't no counterfeit!"

The pudgy, smile-wreathed face of the bartender had also become very sober. The twinkle in his piggish eyes had changed to a hard glitter.

"You changed another ten-dollar bill here earlier in the night, Lafe," he said coldly. "If it's a wrong one, you've got to make good on that."

He turned to the money drawer, picked a ten-dollar bill out of a compartment, slapped it down on the bar. Pete compared it with the original ten-dollar bill. It was also a counterfeit.

"I didn't know the bill wasn't all right," Lafe mumbled. "Gosh! It sure looks like a good one!"

"Yep," Pete agreed. "There's been some work on them bills. That's the way with human nature; a man'll work harder to counterfeit a dollar than he will to earn two by honest labor."

Pete slipped both bills into his pocket. "Since this ain't real money, I'll take charge of it," he told the bartender. "These are mighty good imitations, an' it's my business to keep 'em out o' circulation. Now, this Cal Nicholl took a room here, this man says. Where's his room? I want to see him."

"I don't know what room he's got," the bartender said. "I was on last night when he came in, but it was the boss who rented him the room. We've got ten rooms upstairs, an' only the boss knows which one Nicholl is in, an' the boss is asleep."

"In that case," Pete Rice clipped, "the boss is sure goin' to be woke up. Which room is the boss in?"

THE proprietor was none too gracious when awakened from a sleep obviously made heavier by considerable alcohol, but he nodded his head when Pete explained that he wanted to talk with Cal Nicholl, and led the way to a room near the end of a long, stuffy corridor.

There was no answer to his knock.

Pete turned the knob, found the door locked, and put his shoulder against it, but the proprietor grabbed him hastily. "Wait a second, sheriff," he said. "I got a pass key for all these rooms."

He went down the hall, returned with some keys, and unlocked the door. Pete struck a match, and in the puny yellow flare saw that the bed had been slept in but that the room was now empty. No one had seen Nicholl leave.

Pete learned why a moment later, after he lit the lamp. There were footprints on the dusty extension roof outside the room, and Pete walked out on the roof and looked down. There was a rain pipe leading to the ground.

The sheriff climbed down it, struck some more matches. He found comparatively fresh footprints in the soft earth. Nicholl had left the room secretly. And he had evidently left in a hurry.

His horse was in the stable, but it was discovered that he had taken another—"the fastest one in the barn, too," according to the proprietor, who owned it.

Subsequent investigation showed that Nicholl had ridden his mount out through the valley, had galloped north along the main street. A cow-puncher who had been in the Waterhole Saloon on the north edge of town had seen him "ridin' by like all hell!"

"Looks like he's guilty o' that murder, boss," Misery Hicks remarked.

Pete nodded. "Well, it's a cinch he knows somethin' about it. But he'll be easier to trap than some hombre that 'u'd hang around town an' try to build up an alibi."

The sheriff strode over toward his sorrel. "His kind is bound to make blunders, because he attacks things just like a ram does—with all his force an' both eyes shut. Well, boys, we're on our way. Next job seems to catch Cal Nicholl!"

IN less than an hour, however, Pistol Pete Rice began to realize that catching Cal Nicholl might prove a much bigger job than he had thought.

Pete and his deputies rode their horses at a terrific gait. But the night was rather dark, and the only way to trace Nicholl along this hoof-pocked road was by making inquiries of the couple of horsemen they met riding into Agua Fria to meet an early morning train.

The horsemen were ranch hands who said that near the River Turnpike a rider had passed them. He was forking a big, dark horse, they said, and although he had hauled down his speed just before they met him, he had evidently been riding hard.

They were not personally acquainted with Nicholl, and had not been able to get a good look at the rider's face. That it must have been Cal Nicholl, however, was clear.

Pete was thoughtful as he led his men on through the night. "Near the River Turnpike," the ranch hands had said. If Nicholl was making a desperate effort to escape, it was more than likely he was making for the Powoxamie country to the northwest. That was primitive country up that way, and a fleeing killer would logically head that way to avoid the settled districts.

At the River Turnpike, Pete dismounted and made a minute inspection of the ground. He discovered that some rider—and there was little doubt that it was Nicholl—had left the road here and ridden across a point of land which would save several miles in getting to the Powoxamie River.

It was after dawn when the next clue was picked up. Eight miles southeast of the river bend, the lawmen ran across an irate rancher who had walked out into the road as they were pounding by.

He was leading a dark horse. Pete looked over the animal. Its coat was roughed and ruffled with dried sweat. The rancher, on arising that morning,

had found one of his prize horses missing from a roadside corral. Down the road a piece he had found the strange, used-up horse cropping grass.

Pete nodded. "We'll get your hoss for you, hombre," he said. "We're trailin' a certain man. Seems like he felt the need o' a fresh hoss. He saw yours in the corral, an' slung bridle an' hull from this dark hoss on him, an' then kept on."

"If I ever come across him," the rancher stormed, "he'll weigh a heap more, I'll tell you that! I'll just empty a .45 into him!"

Pete shook his head. "Don't reckon you will, pard," he said. "It begins to look like this man was born to be hanged, an' not shot."

THE three lawmen accepted the rancher's invitation to stop for breakfast. They had a chance to water and feed their horses and rub them down—and enjoyed a luxurious wash and a meal of bacon and eggs and biscuit and coffee.

Burns, the rancher whose horse had been stolen, gave them much information about the lonely country where Nicholl was obviously headed for. Pete had once trailed a killer through that country—but he listened carefully as Burns, an authority on the subject, told him many interesting facts.

Burns said that he had been in correspondence with some Eastern scientists who had written him to make arrangements for boarding their families at his ranch while they explored the Powoxamie River and the primitive land along its banks.

Pete already knew that "Powoxamie" meant "no return" in the dialect of the ancient tribe of Indians believed to have lived along the upper reaches of the stream centuries before.

Almost a hundred yards before, the legend ran, men had dared to go up the river prospecting for gold. And not one who had tried to get to the headwaters of it had returned.

At the head of the river, the old Pima legends ran, was a canyon through which turbulent waters roared. The men had lost their lives when their small boats capsized in the rough waters.

"Them scientists sent one o' their representatives out here to make this place a sort o' downriver headquarters," Burns went on. "He was a little pale-faced city feller, but he was a lot educated, I reckon, an' he sure told me more about that river than I ever knew before—an' I've lived within a dozen miles of it for near ten years."

"If I ever got a vacation from this job o' mine," Pete said, "I'd sure like to go upriver with them hombres. I mean away up. I've only been about ten miles beyond what they call Powoxamie Gorge. That's where me an' my deputies caught that killer three years ago. When are these scientists aimin' to explore up there?"

"Some time next year," Burns said. "Them fellers make arrangements a long way ahead."

He went on to explain that the advance agent of the scientists had a blue print of a scow to be used on the long voyage upriver. He had some records left by the visitor, and brought them out and showed them to the lawmen.

"They look forward to passin' through some of the most primitive country in America," he said. "The feller said there's canyons up there that rise more than a mile above the water, an' that there's Injun carvin's on them walls that'll tell 'em lot more than they know now."

"Yep," Pete said, "I was talkin' with a hunter that went quite a ways up there a few years ago. He says he never saw such game as he saw up there. The only rivers that can compare with it, he said, are the Snake River, an' the Salmon River in Idaho."

"Hopi Joe told me a lot about it,"

Misery Hicks put in. "Joe calls it the River o' No Return, 'cause the Injuns say no one ever can get back from there."

Pete smiled grimly as he shoved back his chair from the table and stood up.

"There's one hombre that's sure goin' to return from there!" he clipped. "An' that's Cal Nicholl! Let's get goin', boys. Nicholl ain't got such a start on us. Our hosses are rested a little now, an' we might catch up with Nicholl before noon!"

PETE RICE'S lean face was set as he led his men toward the Powoxamie River, then up along the one passable bank of that mysterious stream. The other side of the river, even down in this lower region, was largely wilderness.

The miles slipped by. The terrain underwent a decided change. The bank climbed, and the air grew tangier with the scent of pine and juniper, and it grew cooler, even as the sun climbed toward the mid-heavens. The lawmen met no riders.

Burns the rancher had told them that there was a new logging camp about four miles above Powoxamie Gorge, and Pete believed that Nicholl might try to get a new mount at the camp and then strike away from the river—to get into the country to the east of there, a rocky, barren section not unlike the Hole-in-the-Wall country of Wyoming, and at one time a notorious hide-out for outlaws.

It seemed impossible that Nicholl would head much farther up the river, for twelve miles above Powoxamie Gorge, even the trail for horses petered out, and any one wishing to go farther up would have to take to a boat.

The outskirts of the logging camp could be made out shortly before noon. There was a wealth of timber here, the trees growing almost down to the edge of the water in places.

"Ah reckon we'll get a real line on him here," Teeny Butler remarked. "His trail leads right along here. We can find just what start that ranny's got on us."

The lawmen pounded ahead, galloped through a narrow trail winding through towering trees, and came out in a good-sized clearing with a new shack at the north end of it.

Pete Rice's clear eyes made out a figure tied to a tree just at the side of the shack.

"By golly! That seems to be Nicholl tied up to that tree over there!" he exclaimed. "I wonder how these hombres knew he was tryin' to escape from the law?"

He reined his horse across the clearing, pulled it almost to his haunches and slipped from the saddle. A tall, well-built logger came out of the shack. He saw the star on Pete Rice's vest.

"You after this c'yote, sheriff?" he asked.

"You bet we are." Pete told him. "How'd you happen to nab him?"

The logger grinned. "We've got some hosses over here back o' the clearin' in a little log corral. This feller tried to snake one o' the hosses out o' it an' high-tail it. He made the mistake o' not thinkin' that we got sharp ears!"

The logger grinned again. "We was goin' to give him a little special treatment, like bendin' a saplin' over his shoulders. We're kind o' rough here, but we're honest, an' we don't like hoss thieves or any one else on the wrong side o' the law."

"Well, he may not get off as easy as that," Pete told him. He explained about the murder of Rufe Tarrant and how Nicholl had tried to flee the country section where the crime had taken place.

Then he strode over and confronted the tied-up man.

"Cal Nicholl," he said. "I'm arrestin' you for the murder o' Rufe Tarrant.

Pete Rice's clear eyes made out a figure tied to a tree just at the side of the shack.

An' just incidental," he added, "I'm also arrestin' you *for the murder o' Mr. and Mrs. John Carroll!"*

CHAPTER IX.

THE "G" MAN FROM THE EAST.

CAL NICHOLL stared sullenly at the gaunt-faced sheriff.

"It ain't so!" he shot back. "Why—why, I didn't even know Rufe Tarrant was dead!"

The claim was an obvious lie. It showed in Nicholl's lined face, in his strained, bloodshot eyes.

"An' I never as much as been on John Carroll's spread," Cal Nicholl added, as Pete Rice's smoky-gray eyes seemed to bore through him.

At the mention of John Carroll's name, Teeny Butler and Misery Hicks had stared oddly at their chief, and Misery seemed on the point of blurting out some query, but a quick glance from Pete caused him to hold his tongue.

"If you ain't guilty," Pete said to Nicholl, "you'll have a chance to prove it. But I'm arrestin' you now, and I'd lay the odds that you'll stretch hemp!"

"You might lose that bet!" Nicholl snapped. His eyes were flecked with fury. "I got the dinero to retain Sharon Pell to defend me! An' Sharon Pell's beat you before this!"

Pete was silent for a moment. The charge was true enough. Many an outlaw captured by Pete Rice at the risk of his life had been freed in court through the legal trickeries of the Mesa Ridge shyster.

"You wait an' see!" Nicholl boasted. "I demand an immediate trial, an' Sharon Pell's goin' to get me off. He costs plenty o' dinero, Pell does! But I got it to pay over to him!"

Pete Rice started to untie the prisoner. He was wondering where Cal Nicholl, a man who made at the most thirty dollars a month, had gotten the money to retain Attorney Sharon Pell.

ON the trip back to Agua Fria with their prisoner, Misery Hicks was curious, as usual. He waited until the trail narrowed and Teeny Butler rode ahead with the prisoner, taking the latter out of earshot.

"What you said back there's sure got me puzzled, boss," he said in a low tone to Pete. "When you came out with that about John Carroll an' his wife, it hit me like a shot. I never dreamed he had anything to do with the murder of the Carrolls."

"Well, I can't prove it yet, pard," Pete told the little barber-deputy. "He might be innocent, o' course, but it sure looks like he's implicated in both crimes."

He gazed ahead at Cal Nicholl riding just in front of the burly Teeny Butler.

"In the first place," he said, "don't it seem mighty odd that John Carroll an' Rufe Tarrant, both peaceful ranchers, should be murdered within a few days o' each other—after havin' lived in the Agua Fria Valley without harm for a good many years?"

"Well, on thinkin' it over, it does," Misery admitted.

"O' course, that might be coincidence," Pete went on. "But after the murder o' the Carrolls, I searched the house, an' I ran across somethin' I didn't mention at the time—for it's best to keep a tight mouth in cases like that."

Misery looked his curiosity.

"In a drawer o' John Carroll's desk," Pete continued, "I found a little wad o'

counterfeit ten-dollar bills. It seemed right odd, but I didn't connect the fact with the murder—just then. There didn't seem to be any connection; any man might own a couple o' fake bills as novelties; in fact, I got a couple in my desk over in Buzzard Gap."

The sheriff replenished his cud of chewing gum with a couple of fresh sticks.

"But when Rufe Tarrant turns up murdered, an' his employee, Cal Nicholl, starts passin' counterfeit bills—well, if that don't mean some direct connection between them two crimes, then I never forked a hoss or fired a .45!"

They had ridden around a curve in the trail at the river bend, and Pete's body went tense in his saddle as he saw two men standing at the side of the trail holding rifles.

But his body eased in the saddle again as he drew closer and saw that here were two typical prospectors of the "desert rat" type. They looked very old, but like most of their type probably were not as old as they seemed, and they were burned to the color of wet saddle leather.

ONE of them put up his hand in a friendly gesture and spoke in a quavering voice: "Howdy, hombres. What you doin' in this forsaken neck o' the woods?"

Pete grinned. "Howdy, old-timer. Oh, we've been doin' a little work up the line."

The old man shook his head. "Lucky to get work to do. Me an' my pard here, Pop Davis, can't get any of *our* kind o' work to do."

"Lookin' for pay-dirt?" Pete asked.

"Yeah." The old man's expression was bitter. *"Lookin'* for it! What's all the talk mean about there bein' pay-dirt along this here river? We ain't seen none. We been prospectin' a few miles over that way."

He pointed at right angles to the stream. "We tried pannin' a little creek over there that feeds this river. Didn't get nothin' out of it."

He shook his head again. "Huh! Rations danged near gone. Weevils in the flour. Even when we try to fish this stream, we don't seem to get nothin' but dead fish. I'm tellin' you, pard, we ain't got nothin' to be thankful for. No, sir, not a thing."

Pete chuckled at the old man's pessimistic attitude. He seemed the type of person who was happiest while preaching misery.

"Oh, you'll hit it, old-timer," Pete assured the prospector. "Up along the bank here there's a loggin' camp. Reckon you can get some chuck there."

"Why, we ain't got one red copper to buy a crust o' bread," the old fellow complained.

Pete shoved his big hand into his pocket. When he drew it out, three silver dollars jingled in his palm. "You just see how many crusts o' bread this'll get you, pard," he said. "Don't give up. Keep goin', an' I'm bettin' you find a patch o' good luck one o' these days."

The old fellow took the money, but his face still held its bitter expression. "Where folks get the silver an' gold to coin this money," he whined, "is a heap more than I can say. *We* ain't been findin' none. Well, good luck, anyhow. Hope some folks have good luck, even if we ain't had none."

He waved a listless hand as Pete and his men rode on. His partner, a stooped old fellow, had not uttered a syllable.

Pete grinned as he rode on. "The poorest folks I ever seen," he remarked to Misery, "are the ones that's been lookin' for gold. Start makin' shoes for a livin', or manufacturin' glue, or somethin' like that, an' you generally eat well. Start lookin' for gold, an' ten chances to one your stomach won't get too familiar with food."

THE lamps of Agua Fria were lighted when the lawmen arrived in town with their prisoner, who was placed in the Agua Fria Jail.

In the jail office was a telegram from Buzzard Gap, addressed to Sheriff Pete Rice. The sheriff opened it. "Gosh! I hope there ain't been any more murders," he said.

But the message, although urgent, apparently had nothing to do with murder. Curly Fenton, a close friend of Pete's, had wired from Buzzard Gap that a stranger was in town from the East and wished to see Sheriff Rice at once on most important business.

Pete drew his deputies aside. "I got a hunch that this is some government man," he said. "Fifty to one, it's on this counterfeitin' business. Probably big stuff. It may be that——"

The whistle of a train cut into his speech. He knew all the train schedules on the Short Line Railroad.

"Tell you what to do, boys," Pete suggested. "My hoss Sonny is right tired. So are you boys. You tend to the hosses an' put them up, then get yourselves some shut-eye. I'll grab this rattler to Buzzard Gap an' get some sleep on the train. So 'long, I'll have to be steppin'."

His long legs got in motion toward the little Agua Fria station. He swung himself aboard the local that had just pulled in, flopped into a seat, and almost at once sleep came to his tired body.

SHERIFF PISTOL PETE RICE'S hunch proved correct, as most of his hunches did, for that matter. The man waiting to see him at Buzzard Gap proved to be Dal Vane, a Federal man from Chicago.

In the sheriff's headquarters back of Misery Hicks's barber shop, Vane showed his government credentials and got to the point at once.

"I need your help badly, sheriff," he said. "I know your reputation in this section. Word of it's gotten as far as Washington. We know the results you get out here. An' now somethin's happened that may tax all your ability an' experience."

"Counterfeitin' stuff?" Pete asked.

The poise of the Federal man was ruffled, for once. "How the hell did you know?" he asked.

Pete explained of the murders of Tarrant and the Carrolls, of finding counterfeit money in the Carroll ranch house and of the two bogus bills that Cal Nicholl had put in circulation at the Agua Fria Saloon.

"An' you got this Nicholl?" Vane asked.

"Sure have. He's a guest o' the county just at this writin'. He's in snug quarters over at the Agua Fria jail."

Vane drew a sigh of relief. "By golly! A little daylight's filterin' in at last," he said. "So this Nicholl won't talk, eh?"

"Not yet. We may get him talkin' later."

"We may be able to break open the whole case through him," Vane said hopefully. "Now, let me explain. Probably you haven't any idea of the extent of this thing."

He went on to explain how bogus ten-dollar bills had been flooding the country for weeks. They had first appeared in the New York section. Then things had become too hot for the counterfeiters, who had evidently taken up headquarters in Chicago, or near it.

Albert Walker, a G man who had previously turned in almost miraculous results in dealing with mobs of crooks and gangsters, had been assigned to the Chicago area.

Somehow Walker had wormed his way into the counterfeiting gang, and was on the verge of getting information to his colleagues when two other Federal men had also picked up a trail in Chicago and had run a pair of the coun-

terfeiters to their lair in an outlying section.

They had been trapped, however, and they had been killed in a battle with the counterfeiters, as had Walker. Their bodies and the bodies of a couple of counterfeiters they had killed had been found wedged in a truck load of rugs which had been run off one of the Chicago wharves. The remaining members of the gang had fled from Chicago.

"Now, recently," Vane went on, "Denver has become flooded with these phony ten-dollar bills. So has El Paso, and Los Angeles and Frisco. We figure these counterfeiters have some new hide-out here in the West."

PETE RICE was chewing his gum slowly. His smoky-gray eyes were gleaming strangely.

"Reckon we got some kind o' trail, all right," he said. "An' yet this trail's right cloudy, to my mind. Carroll an' Tarrant an' Nicholl sure had *some* connection with all this. An' yet, I'm tellin' you, Vane, there wasn't one o' them men that was the criminal type.

"Carroll an' Tarrant were in the ranchin' business. They were graspin' men, but they were within the law. An' this Nicholl's always worked for a livin'. Is there any special angle? Can you figure out how they might been lugged into this thin'?"

Vane stood up. "I think I can. You say these ranchers were grasping men?"

"That was their reputation in this neck o' the woods."

"That's it, then! We've got a real clue!"

Vane explained why the government had been so worried over this particular case. Many counterfeiting gangs had only a few men who "shoved the queer" in a limited way, passing big bills in restaurants and cafés and other establishments, getting change in good money, and then slipping to some other city to ply their trade.

In this case it had puzzled Washington as to how the counterfeiters managed to get so many of their bills in circulation.

An Illinois farmer, however, who had tried to pass a counterfeit ten-dollar bill at a county fair while he was in a state of intoxication, had finally furnished the G men with some valuable information.

"This poor hick was just taken in, you see," Vane went on. "He wasn't a criminal; he was just a plain fool. You've never had any experience out here in the old 'green goods' game, have you?"

Pete shook his head. "Nope, that game got too ancient even for this neck o' the woods. But, o' course, I'd been told about the game. It was where the crooks sold a package o' fake money for a small sum in good money, wasn't it?"

"That's it. They'd victimize rural folks, people that didn't dare to run against the law but still had a little larceny in 'em. They'd sell the useless package of green goods that the rube thought would pass for real money, then they'd disappear and the rube 'u'd be left holding the bag."

Vane gazed out toward the lighted main street, got a cigarette going, and went on:

"Of course, one man in a million wouldn't be fooled by that old stall, *these* days. But these countefeiters sort of modernized it."

"You mean they sold a quantity of their counterfeit bills for a smaller amount in good bills?"

"Exactly. That's how they put so much of the stuff in circulation. Not only was the underworld gang shoving this stuff. But they got fellows like this Illinois farmer to bite at it. These phony tens are clever work, best I've ever seen. So they didn't have much trouble selling a package of about $10,000 in the phonies for $2,000 in good money."

"Then that's how Carroll and Tarrant got into this!" Pete said.

MUCH of the mystery was being unsnarled. John Carroll, who had previously remained within the law, must have been inveigled into some such deal as the Illinois farmer had been.

Probably Mrs. Carroll, a highly moral woman, had learned of it and had put her foot down—possibly had even threatened to carry the news to the sheriff's office. Learning of this, the counterfeiters had killed both Mr. and Mrs. Carroll, to shut their mouths. Jim Tecumseh, who might have known something about it, was also disposed of by the crooks.

The death of Rufe Tarrant must have occurred for much the same reason. Whether the counterfeiters had killed him or whether Nicholl had become involved with the counterfeiters and had killed him would come out later.

Meanwhile, Nicholl was the key to the situation. One man was in the net. And Pete had learned from experience that, to lighten their own sentences, caught criminals would nearly always talk in the long run.

The gaunt sheriff yawned. The short nap on the train from Agua Fria had come far from restoring the required energy to his body that had been sapped by almost forty hours of continuous action.

He just had to get some sleep. Then he and Vane could take the 7:14 a. m. local to Agua Fria, could put Cal Nicholl through the paces, and probably start the clean-up of the case.

Vane had already registered at the Arizona Hotel in Buzzard Gap, and Pete walked to his home on the edge of town.

He removed his boots on the porch, so as not to awaken his mother. Then he crept silently upstairs. He was so worn out that he fell into bed fully clothed, except for his hat and boots. He was thirsty, but he was too sleepy even to get up for a drink ot water.

He knew absolutely nothing until he was awakened by a heavy banging on the front door of his home. He heard his mother's voice asking who was at the door, then he vaulted out of bed and ran down the stairs. Dawn was just putting a wash of gray over the countryside.

He opened the door and faced the Buzzard Gap station master, who was also the telegraph operator. Without uttering a word, Pete grasped the yellow envelope and ripped it open. The sleep went out of his eyes as they flashed over the message.

"What time is it?" he snapped at the station master.

"Almost five o'clock."

A FROWN passed over Pete's lean face. He had to get to Agua Fria in a hurry, but there was no train—at least none that stopped at Buzzard Gap—before the 7:14 local.

"Now, this is big stuff, pard," he rapped out at the station master. "I've got to get to Agua Fria—pronto! You've got to flag the express! All I can hope is that it's on time!"

"It's on time, all right," the station master said rather uncertainly. "I got the report before I left the office. It'll roll through at 5:19, but I'm afraid I can't——"

"Flag that express, pard!" Pete cut in. "I'm orderin' you to do that! I'm takin' the responsibility. Then, after you wire to have it flagged, run up to the Arizona Hotel an' rouse out a man there named Dal Vane. Tell him to dress in a hurry, that he's goin' some place with me!"

The height of courtesy nearly always, Pete slammed the door, ran back up the stairs. His mother was on the landing outside her room.

He kissed her tenderly. "I'm in a

hurry, ma. Got to get to Agua Fria. Tell you all about it when I get back. Seconds count now."

"All right, son," Mrs. Rice said. She was one of the best of mothers. No one knew just how much she worried about that tall son of hers who rode the danger trails. No one would ever know. For, pioneer woman that she was, she realized that brave, honest men had to take chances in order to keep the community safe.

She smiled sadly but proudly as she peered from her bedroom window and saw her son, guns in holsters, Stetson clamped far down on his head, long-legging it down the road toward the center of town.

Dal Vane, somewhat sleepy-eyed but fully dressed, turned from the stairway of the Arizona Hotel just as Pete blew in through the main door like a hurricane.

"We're leavin' for Agua Fria, Vane!" Pete rapped out. "There's been a jail break there! Twenty men jumped the jailer! An' Cal Nicholl's gone!"

CHAPTER X.

THE POSSE GETS ACTION.

WHEN Pete Rice and Dal Vane jumped from the express train that had slowed up passing through Agua Fria, there was an excited knot of citizens around the railroad station.

Pete's gaunt face was lined and tense. He did not see his deputies in that crowd. His best friends for years, he was well aware of their flaming courage, the cool nerve of Teeny Butler, the reckless foolhardiness of Misery Hicks.

Twenty men had stormed the jail, the wired message had said. But those intrepid Buzzard Gap deputies would have hurled themselves against twice that number, or twice times twice.

They never hesitated against odds. What had happened to them? Had they been mowed down in the battle that must certainly have followed the storming of the jail?

But some of the tenseness went out of Pete's face as a pair of horses, one a scrawny steeldust and the other a mammoth blood-bay, hove into sight around the rear of the station. The riders were Teeny and Misery, and within seconds they had hauled their mounts to a sliding halt and were giving quick details to their chief.

They had just been trying to track some of the fugitives. They had been close to town, had heard the train whistle and, believing Pete might have flagged the express at Buzzard Gap, had raced back to town.

"We was in the hotel gettin' some sleep," Misery said. "It might 'a' been about four o'clock; anyhow, it was still dark. We heard the shots, jumped into our clothes, an' rushed down to the jail. Dog-gone it! Them rannies must 'a' worked like beavers. We was too late to clash with 'em."

Pete saw the intense regret in Misery's face. Being too late to clash with any outlaw force, however big, would always seem bad luck to Misery Hicks. But Pete was grateful in his heart that the jail stormers had worked quickly, that his deputies had been too late to clash with them. For if they had pitted themselves against that big, prepared force, probably they wouldn't be here now.

PETE learned that the jail stormers had been masked. They had come into town from the south, had evidently stopped to rip up a section of rail from a disused freight spur.

They had used this section of rail to batter down the jail door. They had been well led, had struck hard and fast, and had started to escape from town before the citizens were aroused.

They had shot two men—the jailer, who had been drilled through the head,

presumably to die instantly, and a rancher who had heard the ruckus and had bravely made a stand while waiting for the townsmen to be aroused by the shots. The rancher had stopped three outlaw bullets, but would live.

The rancher had made a desperate stand. He swore that he had plugged two of the outlaws squarely through the heart. Only one body, however, was found outside the jail.

A posse of Agua Fria citizens had been combing the country around Agua Fria since dawn. Teeny and Misery had been in one section of the posse, but the outlaws had split up just out of town and had ridden singly, and in twos and threes, in different directions.

It would be a hard job to capture them, Pete realized. He did not overlook the fact that some of them might have returned to town and might now be in the knot of men around the station, or might even be riding in the second or third posse that was organized. Those men could not be ordinary outlaws; they must have been masked for a particular reason.

"By jaspers! It's good you hopped that express. We'll get them killers now, sure as shootin'!" Misery ended up.

But Pete Rice was not at all sure. He was not even sure that there would be any shooting. He could not perform miracles. The trail of the well-led outlaws was doubtless badly gummed up by this time by the possemen's horses, jumbled generally.

"Get Sonny, if you don't mind, pard," he told Misery. "An' you, Teeny, take me to that rancher that was wounded."

"Ah sho' will, boss," Teeny said. "But Ah reckon he ain't got no more to tell than what he's told already."

"I just want to be sure that what he's told already is right," Pete said. "Looks like them outlaws was pullin' a trick to lead us into false ideas. Outlaws is like all the rest of us, only more so; they're a bunch o' conceited asses. They think they can see right clean through anybody else, but don't think anybody else can see even a half an inch through *them!*"

Teeny led him to the house of a doctor near the station, where the rancher lay in an upstairs room. His three bullet wounds were in the shoulders, two in the right, one in the left. He had been given opiates, and was reasonably comfortable. Pete questioned him briefly.

"One thing I want to know more than anything else, pard," he said. "Did you get two o' them outlaws through the heart, or could you be mistaken?"

"Sheriff," the rancher replied with spirit, "I was about ten paces away from both of 'em. I aimed at their hearts. An' I'm tellin' you, when I aim at hearts ten paces away, I hit *hearts!*"

"That's good enough for now," Pete said. "You done right good work. Get some rest."

He left with Teeny. Misery had Sonny ready just outside the office. The barber-deputy had also rented a livery horse for Dal Vane. Although an Easterner, Vane was an experienced horseman. Like all G men, he could fight, ride, shoot—in fact, could do anything that might be necessary when pitted against crooks.

Two Agua Fria citizens also joined the lawmen and the Federal man. They were old Jerry Case, the dignified but nervy president of the local bank, and Chris Ericcson, a merchant.

All Agua Fria was aroused. Every one seemed bitter that the town had been taken by surprise. Before the lawmen got started, their posse had grown to eleven men.

ALTHOUGH the rough country around Agua Fria was alive with indignant citizens determined to bring in captives, Pete Rice was far from optimistic as, well out of town, he

picked up the tracks of the first men who had broken away from the main group of outlaws and had ridden off at a tangent across country.

He could see, perhaps more clearly than the men who rode with him, that one clever leader had furnished the brains for those twenty desperate criminals.

That leader's advice to his men probably was to ride along streams, desert their mounts, hide their horses in any remudas they came across, sling hulls and bridles down gulches—anything to keep from being trailed.

Although he did not appear to be doing so, Pete was keenly studying the strangers in his posse. He had to admit to himself, though, that all looked genuine. All were rugged-faced, stern-eyed. All looked like honest citizens who could and would fight—if they could find anybody to fight.

As the sheriff came across stragglers' trails, he detailed certain of his men to follow them up. Where it was seen that one outlaw had struck off the trail to ride cross-country, Pete sent two possemen to trail him; where two outlaws had straggled away, Pete sent three possemen.

The danger was that the stragglers might have been advised by their clever leader to rejoin one another at some agreed-upon hide-out in this brushy, heavily wooded section. That, however, was a chance that had to be taken. If any of the possemen surprised a greater force of outlaws, they were to fire four quick shots. That would bring the main body of possemen to their assistance.

He sent Misery on an off-trail with Case, the belligerent old bank president, and Ericcson, the merchant—two men whom he knew could be trusted. He sent Teeny on another off-trail with a fresh-faced young cowboy who could be nothing else than honest.

The few possemen who were comparative strangers to him and *might* be tricksters, he kept in his own larger group. He did not want his deputies to be subjected to unnecessary risks.

Dal Vane he kept with him. Vane was a fighter, cool, clever, resourceful—a man to be counted upon if there should be any treachery among the possemen.

Pete and his men beat through acres of brush, explored mottes of trees. They were in a rolling country now, traveling along a strip of sandy ground flanked on one side by rank vegetation and on the other by rocks and bluffs.

The trail had been retracked so much that it was hard to tell which might be the tracks of outlaws' horses and which the hoofprints of the possemen's mounts. Yet there were possibilities here.

Any one of those deep hollows where the vegetation grew so thickly could be an outlaw hiding place, and it was just possible that there were caves in the sides of some of those bluffs.

Pete sent the rest of his men—with the exception of Dal Vane, the Federal man—to examine the sides of the bluffs for possible caves. He was reining Sonny around, to explore one of the brush-clothed hollows when he sawed the sorrel to a haunch-down stop and listened.

Four quick shots sounded off to the south—the direction in which he had sent Misery and Case and Ericcson. The signal!

Pete swung Sonny to the south and drove in his spurs. The spirited sorrel exploded into action.

"Come on, Vane!" Pete yelled over his shoulder. "Misery's found somethin'!"

But as he raced at breakneck speed over that uneven ground, and he heard the *boom* of heavy rifles and the sharp *bang-bang* of .45s, he feared that probably it was the outlaws who had done the finding. Misery had only two men with him, and there were certainly over

a dozen guns booming down there to the south.

"Come on, Sonny!" Pete yelled. "All you got!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE REAL SET-UP.

THE sorrel flattened its body closer to the ground. His tail whipped straight out. His mane rippled in the wind. He topped a rise, rocketed down into a shallow valley, hit even ground. He heeled over like a sailboat in a vicious gust of wind as Pete veered his head around to avoid a clump of thorny brush.

He took a line of high, close-grouped boulders like a steeplechase winner, skidded halfway down the sloping side of a ravine, then picked up his regular, sure-footed stride again.

Pete could see the flash of guns in the ravine below him now. He snaked his rifle from its saddle scabbard, removed his feet from the stirrups, and slid to the ground.

He was elated to find that he was to the rear of the outlaws. He could see the backs of two sombreroed men just below him. Misery and his men were apparently under cover behind a row of trees on the far side of the ravine—for Pete could not see them.

If he could hold the outlaws from this side, Misery and his men could probably hold them from the other. Probably the outlaws could be made to surrender. Pete hoped so. He wanted these men alive. It was just possible that Cal Nicholl was among with these men. And Nicholl was the key to the whole situation.

DAL VANE was lying beside the sheriff in the brush in a surprisingly short length of time. Although the G man was new to this kind of warfare, he was adapting himself to it exceptionally well. His .45 came up as one of the sombreroed men rose from some tall grass to change his position, but Pete pulled down his gun arm.

"Wait, Vane!" he whispered. "We want as many as possible o' them rannies alive. Dead men tell no tales. An' they don't give the law any information!"

Vane nodded. "We got to keep 'em from charging our men over there in the trees, though, Rice," he whispered.

Pete knew it, only too well. They were gradually creeping up on the little deputy and his two men firing from the shelter of the trees. If they came to closer quarters, their superior numbers might tell.

The sheriff snaked himself along the ground toward the outlaws. Vane followed, rather slowly, for he was not used to this sort of thing.

Pete was watching that row of sombreroed men like a hawk. He could have gotten some of them in the back. But he was not used to shooting men in the back. He would not shoot at all, he decided, unless it was necessary to protect Misery and Case and Ericcson.

He saw two of the outlaws circling around in the cover of some thick brush. They were planning either to edge completely around and get Misery and his men from the rear, or to get to one end of the line of trees and pour in a flanking fire.

Pete held his rifle ready. Those outlaws must not be allowed to do that at any cost. If they edged three feet farther, Pete Rice would have to bring one of them down with a shot through the shoulder. That would doubtless send the rest of them back to cover.

He watched the leader of the three men, finally brought his rifle to his shoulder, and was ready to fire.

At the same instant there was a thunder of hoofs to the east, and down the side of the ravine rode Teeny Butler on his mammoth blood-bay and the fresh-faced cowboy on his close-coupled little roan.

"All right, Vane!" Pete yelled. "We got 'em now! We got near as many men as they have now? We'll pile into 'em! No shootin'—unless it's to save one of our lives!"

PETE had leaped to his feet and was charging down the ravine. He saw one of the outlaws whirl, aim a rifle at the onrushing Teeny, saw Teeny whip up his .45 and send the fellow pitching to the ground.

At the same time, a murderous fire blasted out from behind the line of trees where Misery and his men were. Another pair of outlaws crumbled to the ground.

"No more shootin', men!" Pete yelled. "Sail into 'em. We'll capture 'em!"

As he yelled, he was sliding the rest of the way down into the ravine. He brought up almost at the feet of a giant outlaw who whirled to fire. Pete's fist cracked against his jaw, and he sank to the ground.

Yelling triumphantly, Misery Hicks was now leading his men from back of the line of trees. The little barber-deputy was whirling something over his head. Pete knew what it was. He had seen Misery use that novel weapon many times.

It was an Argentine bolas, a three-stranded, lead-tipped leather apparatus which had taken many a desperado out of action, yet did not kill.

Misery hurled his bolas at an escaping outlaw. It circled through the air like a three-spoked wheel. It hit the running man just below the knees. The thongs wrapped themselves tentaclelike about his legs; and the man pitched to the ground.

The desperado, running just in his wake, tripped over him, stumbled, and fell. Pete saw old Jerry Case, who could be so cool and gentlemanly in the Agua Fria bank, dart out from cover and pistol-whip the outlaw over the skull as he started to get to his feet.

Two of the remaining outlaws showed higher-than-average courage for their breed. They plopped down in the brush back to back, and brought their .45s into play. One of them had a bead on Misery's back, but before he could fire, Pete knocked the gun out of his hand with a quick bullet.

Another pair of outlaws took a desperate chance to try to get up the side of the ravine. But Teeny Butler's Australian bull-whip was brought into play. It was a short stock with a long leather lash tied to it. *Crack! Crack!* It snaked out twice, each time caught an outlaw behind the ear.

Although it did not kill, it would have been a vicious weapon in the hands of any man. In the hands of the herculean Teeny Butler it was particularly vicious, and more than once the stinging force of that lash had brought unconsciousness.

The desperado force were in full rout by now. The few survivors were racing about aimlessly. One tried to get out of the ravine by the north side, and ran into the crashing fist of Pete Rice. Another tangled with Dal Vane and found that even men who looked citified—Vane still wore his city clothes—could pack a terrific wallop.

IT was a matter of a very few minutes before the possemen had everything well in hand—and only a few more minutes before they had the survivors of the outlaw force in bonds.

The lawmen and their men had not suffered as much as a scratch. Misery Hicks was jubilant, and Pete was well satisfied, but somewhat disappointed that Cal Nicholl was not in the group captured—disappointed yet not surprised.

For Pete Rice could tell by the dull, bestial faces of the captured desperadoes that these were merely hired gun-

. . . Teeny Butler's Australian bull-whip was brought into play.

nies. He was not at all skeptical when the two or three who showed a disposition to talk claimed that they knew nothing back of the real reasons for the jail delivery. They had merely been looked up by a man who knew they had their services for hire—a man who had paid them well. The description they gave of this man would fit five men out of ten; in other words, nothing they had to say was of any value.

Pete left Misery and Teeny in charge of the prisoners, then drew Dal Vane aside. "The worst of it all is that I believe 'em, Vane," he said. "In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if the leader o' that jail-stormin' band—an', o' course, he's mixed up with the counterfeiters an' maybe the chief of 'em—arranged it so that these poor dumb gunnies would positively be caught. It 'u'd give him an' his lieutenants more time to make their get-away with Nicholl."

"Then what's the set-up now?" Vane asked. "It doesn't look as if there's any hot trail on the ones we really want, does it?"

Pete admitted that it didn't. "We'll get Nicholl, though," he said confidently. "The folks in Agua Fria have known Nicholl for years. I'll put a detailed description of him on the wire. Some town marshal or deputy'll pick him up sooner or later—if we don't pick him up first."

The deputies had the outlaws' horses rounded up and soon had the prisoners tied to their saddles. The ride into Agua Fria was started.

THE sheriff was still somewhat fagged out from the loss of sleep, but his active brain was working. There were thoughts in that brown-thatched head of his that he was not voicing just at present. He talked

little during the ride into Agua Fria.

The citizens left in town showed intense interest in the procession as it proceeded down the main street toward the jail. Epithets were hurled at the prisoners.

"Keep back, boys!" Pete called to the citizens. He did not want an attempted lynching bee added to the already big excitement in the Agua Fria district.

But despite his command to keep back, a dusty, weary-looking figure barred the path of the sheriff. It was Old "Pop" Wilkin, and he was leading a burro that seemed as weary as himself.

"Howdy, sheriff," came a greeting in a cracked voice. "Seems like you been doin' some real business to-day. Well, you're lucky you got work to do. *I* can't find none to do. Bad luck sure is campin' on my trail all the time."

It seemed as if the sun and desert winds had dried his vocal cords to brittle strands.

Pete nodded at the pathetic old figure. "Howdy, old-timer," he greeted. "You're lookin' right pert," he added.

The old man sniffed. "Well, I ain't *feelin'* fine, I can tell you that! Bad luck an' worse luck, that's all I get!"

"Oh, you an' your pard'll hit that pot o' gold yet," Pete assured the old fault-finder.

"My pard?" the old man shot back. "Huh! I ain't even got no pard any more! My pard's gone over the long trail!"

Pete pulled Sonny to the side of the cavalcade. "Dead?" he asked, and his face showed his surprise.

"Dead. Hassayampa was younger'n me, took chances that I wouldn't. About an hour after you passed us on the trail yesterday, Hassayampa got an idea he'd take a chance on findin' some new diggin's along that river. He cut away from me, went upstream. I waited till sunset, then went huntin' for him."

Pete stared hard. "Find him?"

"Yep." There was just the hint of a break in the old man's voice. "I found him, all right. He'd slipped on them rocks that goes down from the high bank to the edge o' the stream; fell down, it seems, then cracked his head. I found his body floatin' down the stream."

Pete shook his head. "Tough luck, old-timer. You sure got my sympathy."

The sheriff was staring toward the distant horizon. There was a thoughtful expression in his gray eyes. "What did you do with your partner's body?" he asked.

"What could I do, sheriff? I buried him."

"Where'd you bury him?"

"Just a couple o' rope lengths away from where I picked him out o' the river. Why?"

"It just occurred to me that I'd like to take a look at the body o' that pard o' yours, old-timer."

The sheriff slid from the saddle. "Come on, hombre. I'll take you along to show me just where you buried him."

"This burro o' mine's right tired," the old man whined.

"I'll rent you a hoss that ain't a bit tired," Pete told him. "Come ahead. We'll go down to this eatin' place an' get some chuck first."

And once more Pistol Pete's smoky-gray eyes gleamed as if strange, new thoughts might be stirring within him.

THE sun was very low in the sky as the Buzzard Gap trio once more galloped along the one passable bank of the Powoxamie River. With them were Dal Vane, the Federal man, and old Pop Wilkin, the prospector.

Pete Rice's jaws were working—but not in conversation. He was chewing his gum vigorously, as he nearly always did when he was thinking hard. He did little talking, and when he did talk, it was on general subjects.

Misery Hicks and Teeny Butler, who knew more about the gaunt-faced sheriff than any other men in Arizona, realized that their chief had some plan in mind, but that he did not care to discuss it prematurely.

The riders galloped their horses around a long bend in the river, and Pop Wilkin rode close to Pete and pointed to a clump of trees on a slight eminence three or four miles ahead.

"It's under them trees that poor Hassayampa's layin'," he said. "Life, somehow won't seem natural to me any more, without Hassayampa bein' with me. Not that he talked much, but he was a real pard just the same."

Pete recalled the silence of Wilkin's partner on the occasion when he had first seen him.

"Maybe that's one o' the reasons you were good pards," he said. "It's been my experience that great talkers don't often have many real friends."

Dusk was falling now, yet Pete did not light the lantern that swung from the saddle horn until the cavalcade had turned from the river bank and were screened by the thick trees that surrounded a fresh mound of earth over which several large rocks had been piled.

Picks and shovels were brought out. Pete lighted the lantern, but he partially masked the flame even in this wilderness.

Pete did not call upon Vane or the old prospector to do any of the digging. It was clear that Vane, experienced in many ways, had little or no experience in this sort of work, and Pete did not disturb old Wilkin, who sat on the hard earth, looking dolefully into the gloom.

The shadows seemed to clutch with blackened fingers at the three lawmen sweating over their lugubrious chore. The hole in the ground grew larger and larger. And at a depth of approximately four feet, Teeny Butler's shovel tip brushed against something that gave beneath the weight.

A few extra shovelfuls were carefully removed. Misery held the lantern closer, and in the dim rays the blanket-wrapped form of a corpse could be made out.

The corpse was lifted out. Pete unrolled the blanket. Old Pop Wilkin turned away for a moment, and one of his calloused, dirty hands was brushed over his eyes.

Pete Rice's gray eyes were alight with a brilliant flame as he made a careful examination of the wound on the back of the dead man's skull. His jaws were set in hard lines.

He turned and spoke to Val Dane. "You was mentionin' somethin' about havin' a magnifyin' glass with you, Vane," he said.

THE Federal man nodded, and grinned rather sheepishly.

"Yes, I have one," he said. "I always feel rather self-conscious and Sherlock Holmesy carrying it around, but we use it a good deal when we're on these 'smooth money' cases."

He reached into his pocket, took out a folding magnifying glass.

"I got sharp eyes," Pete told him, "but I may be wrong on what I think I see stuck to them bloodstained hairs on the back o' his head. Just take a look through that glass, Vane, will you?"

He held the lantern down close to the dead man's head while Vane made a minute examination through the powerful glass.

"I've seen enough of 'em to know," the Federal man said as he took away the glass. "Those are wooden splinters!"

"That's what I thought," Pete Rice said with a grim shake of the head. "Well, that's the final clue. We've got the real set-up now. I reckon we got this case broke right now, boys!"

His voice was stern but exultant as

he added: "I'll bet any hombre here a hundred to one that the rannies up in that loggin' camp are either the counterfeiters or their look-outs! Yep, I'd even increase them odds! Seems like this case is about washed up!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE DYNAMITE SHACK.

DAL VANE stood there, a tense figure. His hands were clenched. His lips were drawn tight across his teeth. Teeny Butler's big face showed his astonishment.

"Well, by jaspers!" Misery Hicks exclaimed.

"This pard o' Pop Wilkin's didn't come to his death accidentally," Pete Rice announced. "He didn't fall an' hit his head against any rocks. Rocks don't have wooden splinters, an' you saw the splinters stuck to them blood-stains, Vane."

"I certainly did," Vane put in. "He was clubbed to death!"

Old Pop Wilkin leaped to his feet. *"What?"* he gasped. "If anybody kilt my pard, I'll cut the gizzard——"

"Wait a minute, Pop," Pete cut in. "We'll take care o' the rattlers that murdered your pard. If you want to throw in with us, I reckon that's your privilege."

Dal Vane's keen face showed his eagerness. "I hope you're right, sheriff," he said, "but I can't quite figure out how you seem so sure that these loggers you mention are back of it all?"

"That's because you ain't been on this end o' the case as long as I have, Vane. Now, let's take all the facts. First, it's plain that this pard o' Pop Wilkin's was murdered, ain't it?"

"That seems clear enough," Vane conceded.

"All right. Then if he was murdered, somebody murdered him. It could have been Pop, here, o' course. But that's out o' the question. If Pop had done it, he never would 'a' told me his pard was dead. Or if he had told me, he'd say he'd been drowned, or somethin' like that. He'd never 'a' brought us here to the grave. That lets Pop out."

The sheriff's jaws worked on his gum. "I figure these loggers—or the rannies posin' as loggers—didn't want folks prowlin' around their camp. Naturally, they wouldn't. Strangers 'u'd see thin's. Maybe they told Pop's pard, when he was prowlin' around, to make himself scarce. Probably he was a little stubborn; all these prospectors are that way.

"They feel they got as much right to the earth as anybody else. Or maybe even this poor hombre stumbled into the camp an' saw thin's that made him dangerous from their point o' view. Anyhow, it looks like they clubbed him over the head an' threw him in the river."

Vane shook his head. "It *could* be that way," he admitted. "But that seems to be a lot of guesswork, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does. But this murder here ain't the first clue. In fact, it's the last one. Now, why did Nicholl—o' all places to run for when he was escapin' the law—make for this River o' No Return, as it's called?

"It was because he knew that certain members o' the counterfeitin' gang were there. He was mixed up with 'em, somehow. He figured they could back him up, that if me an' my deputies followed him into that camp, the hombres there 'u'd turn on us an' cut us to pieces."

"But they didn't. In fact, you told me it was the loggers who captured Nicholl?"

PETE grinned. "Yep, that's what I said. The way I figure it is this: Nicholl's brain ain't too keen. He couldn't see as far as the leader up in that camp. Them hombres up there

knew that some folks must have known that we were headed up there. If we turned up missin', there'd be an investigation. O' course, they didn't want anythin' like that. Their game would 'a' been all gummed up."

"You mean the leader up there talked Nicholl into givin' himself up?"

"That's it. They probably convinced Nicholl he couldn't get away anyhow. So why not give them the credit o' catchin' him an' tyin' him up an' turnin' him over to the law?"

"And, of course, they were back of the jail delivery."

"Of course. They guaranteed Nicholl that if he played the game, they'd see him through. That's why Nicholl boasted so much about retainin' Sharon Pell to clear him. He didn't have any intention o' gettin' Sharon Pell. He knew the gang 'u'd be down to free him, that they'd have to make good, because if they didn't, he could tell too much about 'em."

"Ah don't know, boss," Teeny Butler said in dubious tones. "If they was the fellers that stormed the jail, it's right odd we didn't run across the tracks o' a lot o' horsemen on the way up here this afternoon."

Old Pop Wilkin, who had thrown his weary old body on the ground again, once more leaped to his feet.

"By thunder! *That's* who I heard last night! It had me puzzled then. But it must 'a' been them killin' rattlers!"

Wilkin pointed over to a hill to the west of the river bank. "I spread my blankets over there among the alders last night. I was feelin' glum. I'd buried my pard. For once, I couldn't get to sleep. Then, suddenlike, I heard a lot o' hosses. It was dark, an' I couldn't see anythin' through the alders, but I'd been listenin' to hosses all my life. I'd say there must 'a' been near a dozen of 'em. An' they was goin' like all hell!"

"That's it, then," Pete said. "It was them rannies ridin' to town. They didn't take the regular trail, o' course. They rode away from the river bank. An' on the return trip, they must 'a' broken up in twos an' threes an' reached the camp by some roundabout way."

"Seems to be proving up," Vane admitted, "and I guess you have other reasons for being so sure of this, Rice."

"I have. I got the first hunch when I was talkin' to Pop here yesterday. He mentioned the hard luck with food supplies—even to the fish in the river bein' dead. Get it? *Dead fish!*"

PETE replenished his wad of chewing gum with a couple of new sticks.

"Dead fish. Why should fish be dead in a fisherman's paradise like this? Well, one reason could be that some o' those fellows threw acid in the stream. Acid's used for etchin' plates for counterfeit money, ain't it? Some thoughtless hombre just threw away the used acid into the river. Naturally, it poisoned the fish."

Pete smacked a fist into the palm of his other hand. "That started me thinkin'. An' when we were ridin' out with the posse this mornin', I made it a point to talk to Jerry Case, the president o' the Agua Fria Bank."

"I seen you an' him jawin' together a lot," Misery Hicks put in. "Seems like you done more talkin' than I've knowed you to do in a long time."

"Yep, I was gettin' certain facts from Case. His bank manages a lot o' property up this way. I began askin' about this loggin' camp. He told me the loggers just took a cheap option on the land; when they got their machinery up, they were to make a contract for a lease.

"In other words, they didn't want to make much investment. They'd stalled along, an' before the real expense started, they'd change their headquarters again."

"Yes, these fellows never stay in one place very long," Vane said. "Give 'em a month or two, an' they could flood the country with bad money; then when things would get hot, they'd pull their freight."

Pete reminded his listeners of the talk he had had that morning with the wounded rancher.

"He said he'd gotten two o' them jail stormers through the heart," he said. "An' we found only one body outside. Why?"

Vane got the point at once. "I get you, sheriff. The body they carted away was obviously some city type. Probably his picture was in the rogues' gallery. They didn't dare leave his body around."

"Yes," Pete said, "an' the other one was just some hired Western gunny. They left that one, for it wouldn't furnish any clue; in fact, it 'u'd throw the law off the scent."

"Well, by jaspers!" Misery Hicks exclaimed. "We ain't so many miles from that camp right now. How about lopin' up that way an' slammin' into them fellers?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Not right now, pard. We've only got five men. They must have a lot more than that. Nope. I'll tell you the only thin' that can win for us against the big odds we'll probably be up against. That's the element o' surprise. We'll wait till most o' them rannies have bunked up for the night."

Pete and his men were still far behind on sleep. It was decided that they would spread their blankets over near the alders to the west of the river bank. They would sleep till about one in the morning. They could get to the camp some time around two. It was certain that most of the camp would be asleep by then.

The body of Pop Wilkin's partner was reburied. Then Pete and his men led their horses over to the alders, staked them in grazing ground, and turned in.

They slept like babies. They were storing up energy for the moment, just a few hours ahead, when they would most certainly be facing hot lead.

SOMEWHERE in the wilderness to the west of the alders, an owl hooted at the silver disk slipping down behind the purple vault. Wolves and coyotes howled in the distance. Puffs of wind rustled the dry pine branches so that the rattle sounded like the monotone of a horde of cicadas.

Pistol Pete Rice slipped out of his blankets. He peered at the dial of his silver watch. It was almost one o'clock. About an hour would be required to make the trip to the logging camp—for to avoid being heard Pete and his men would have to make the last mile or so on foot.

He aroused his men. They had gone over their guns before rolling into their blankets for the welcome rest, and were prepared to start. They lashed the rolled-up blankets to their saddles, and they were soon on the trail. They followed the river, but they kept about a hundred yards away from the brink, where trees largely hid their movements and grass deadened the sound of their horses' hoofs.

Pete Rice's eyes and ears were constantly alert for sights or sounds. He wanted to be sure to make this a surprise attack. He had no idea whether the counterfeiting plant would be found at the loggers' camp or whether the supposed loggers were only look-outs for the actual counterfeiters farther up the river.

But he figured that in either case, the only way to win out at the camp was to swoop down upon it and get the jump on the crooks before they realized what it was all about.

He and his men swung past Powox-

amie Gorge. The logging camp was less than five miles ahead. They struck away from the river at the Gorge, for the bank trail was narrow and rocky.

They circled around a great spire of granite rearing like some monolith in the steel-blue air, then swung back toward the river. There was a great drop in the bed of the stream at this point. The water rushed and foamed and swirled. It was almost a rapids here.

About three miles above the Gorge, Pete dismounted and motioned to his men to follow his example. They walked the horses two or three hundred yards. The animals picked their way carefully along the soft ground.

Pete and his men tethered the horses in a small break in the rock wall, which ran along the river bank. The country was getting wilder, rockier.

Then the sheriff started to circle to the west. His companions were close on his heels. Pete picked a course where for the most part they would be in the shelter of the trees which grew large and luxuriant in this wilderness section.

Several hundred yards from the camp, Pete could see a lighted lantern bobbing. It was over near the river bank; at times it seemed actually on the water.

"That may be some sort o' watchman, I reckon," the sheriff told his followers. "That hombre's got to be taken out right quiet. One of us can slip up quieter. Reckon that one oughta be me."

While his men crouched in the darkness, Pete walked softly along the sandy ground, stopped occasionally to watch the man at the river's edge.

At first it seemed as if the fellow might be fishing in the stream, then, as Pete continued to watch, he saw that he was not fishing—not fishing, at least, for fish.

The sheriff flopped to the ground and began snaking himself along. He could not take any chance on discovery now. If the watchman, or whoever he was, fired a shot, or shouted, the camp would be aroused at once.

PETE crept to within twenty feet of the man with the lantern. Fifteen. Twelve. Ten. Then, for some reason, the man turned around. At the same instant, Pete sprang to his feet and dived at the fellow's legs.

His lean figure hit the other man just beneath the knees. The impact toppled the man with the lantern to the ground. Then Pete Rice's big fists drummed down on the other man's jaw.

The outlaw tried to draw a .45 from a holster, but Pete clutched his gun wrist in a grip of steel. With his other hand balled into a fist, he stabbed out quickly, caught the outlaw on the point of the jaw. The outlaw went limp.

Pete righted the lantern, which had fallen over but had not exploded, then dragged the unconscious man back to where Vane and Pop Wilkin and the deputies were waiting.

The outlaw lay like a dead man. For Pistol Pete Rice could hit with tremendous force, and he had not spared his strength. Pete and his men waited.

"Looks like he's never comin' to," Misery Hicks whispered.

"I'll bring him around, all right," Pete said. "Just stick a gun in his ribs. If he comes to before I get back, tell him that one yawp out o' him means his life!"

The sheriff ran down to the river bank, filled his Stetson with cold water. He shot a glance out into the river, frowned, then set down his hat and hauled on a line that was snagged to a post on the bank.

A net came in with the rope, and in the net were several logs. Pete pulled in the logs, rolled them up on the bank, and examined them.

His eyes widened. Finally he emptied the water from his Stetson, clamped the hat down on his head and walked back to where his men were guarding the unconscious outlaw. He dragged one of the logs after him, a rather slim hickory log.

Misery Hicks was just finishing lashing the prisoner with piggin strings, and as he drew one of them tight, the prisoner stirred. He opened his eyes, stared blankly at the ring of strange faces. Then he recoiled as the muzzle of Teeny Butler's .45 was poked into his ribs.

"Ah'm sayin', hombre," Teeny warned in a low tone, "that if you let one peep out o' you, it'll sho' be the last noise you make on this earth!"

"What's the idea?" the prisoner mumbled. "All right, I won't yell. But what's the idea? You guys ain't got nothin' on me. You can't pin any rap on me."

Dal Vane grinned. "Doesn't sound so Western, does it, boys?" he said.

Pete shook his head. "Nope. An' we don't want his kind in the West, Vane. But he might look a little more Western when he's got a noose around his neck."

Vane's eyes hardened. "It's a sight I'll enjoy. These fellows didn't give my buddies in Chicago much of a break."

Pete knelt beside the trussed-up man. "You're goin' to talk, hombre. We've got you dead to rights. How many men in this camp?"

"There's twelve of 'em; thirteen, with me. But I don't see what you got against us, sheriff? You *are* a sheriff, ain't you? We ain't done nothin' against the law."

"No?" Pete asked. He turned to his companions. "This ranny was doin' a little fishin' when I tangled with him. Just look at the fish he caught, boys."

He rolled over the log he had dragged up from the river. Then he opened his big clasp knife and stuck the point of the blade into the bark.

"You see, boys," he started, "it's just a case o'——"

Bang! Bang!

Two bullets whistled close to the men seated and kneeling on the ground.

PETE whirled. His .45 had leaped into his hand with the speed of light, but the logger who had sneaked up on them was already racing back into the gloom. Pete fired, and the fellow stumbled. But Pete realized that whether he had hit his target or not, the fat was in the fire now.

For there was a chorus of shouts from the cabins a few hundred yards from the river. The cabins spewed out several men, in various stages of undress.

"There's only one chance for us, boys!" Pete snapped quickly. "Spread out!"

He leaped to his feet and raced through the darkness toward a cabin or shack that seemed to have no occupants. A rifle spanged, and a bullet whined over his head.

Pete heard the crack of .45s back where he had separated from his men, but he kept going, missed another bullet by a fraction of an inch, leaped and grabbed the sill of the shack's one window—set very high—and crashed through the glass into the shack.

He had protected his eyes with his hands, but he felt the warm blood running down his face where the glass had cut him. He had more important things than minor wounds to think of, however.

For he heard the main body of the loggers yelling as they raced toward the shack. A few had turned, were exchanging shots with two of Pete Rice's men who had leaped behind some trees near the edge of the river.

The main body of the loggers swarmed about the shack. They had

taken to the shelter of the trees just across the clearing. They were yelling exultantly to one another. A second later, Pete realized the reason back of their exultation.

For cases were piled high just inside the doorway of the shack. There was just enough moonlight for Pete to make out what they contained—dynamite!

"Wait a minute, boys!" came a hoarse command. "I'll slip a rifle bullet through that window! Get back! You'll see some fireworks in a minute! Get back! It'll go sky-high!"

There was a mad scurry as the men raced away from the shack.

Again came the hoarse, exultant voice of the rifleman. He had evidently retreated farther back into the gloom, but was still within easy rifle range.

"I'm layin' the odds," he yelled, "that within three shots I can plug a bullet in that case o' blastin' powder! I know just where the case sets! Just count these shots before the explosion, boys! Ready!"

There was a flash back among the trees, the sound of the report of a rifle, and a bullet crashed through the window of the shack!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE UPRIVER JOB.

THE slug tore through the back wall of the shack up near the roof. The rifleman was evidently lying prone back among the trees. He had been firing upward at the high window. He had missed his target—the case of blasting powder. But he might not miss it with the next shot!

Pete Rice had to take a desperate chance. He leaped up, caught the sill of the high window, and drew himself up. He might stop a rifle bullet, but he had to take that chance in his desperate effort to try to get out.

He might be lucky enough, he thought, only to get a slug through the shoulder. Even wounded, he could topple out of the window, could crawl away into the gloom before the shack was blown to pieces.

He sprawled to the floor as a piece of the high sill broke under his weight. As he lay there on the floor with the piece of wood in his hand, another shot tore through the window. It struck the rear wall of the shack—lower, this time. The rifleman was coming closer to his target.

Pete's hand came in contact with something that felt like a piece of thin clothesline. But Pete Rice knew what it was. It was a piece of fuse. He drew out his knife, cut a short length of it, then once more leaped for the high sill.

He was waiting for that next rifle shot when he heard the dim report of a .45, then the shrill, excited voice of Misery Hicks.

"Get out of it, Pete!" came Misery's frenzied voice. "I got this feller with the rifle. Get out of it!"

Pete took the rest of the window glass with him as he leaped to the ground. Nearly a dozen men were now surging toward him. They were blazing away with .45s, but they were poor marksmen, and the light was bad. And several of them whirled as they were attacked from the rear by the deputies and Dal Vane and Old Pop Wilkin, who were banging away with their guns.

One of the loggers dropped to the ground. The rest surged toward Pete, as if to surround him and take him prisoner.

And suddenly the gaunt-faced sheriff was standing there with something that sputtered in his hands. The sight made the loggers recoil suddenly.

"Stop!" Pete Rice yelled. "Throw down them guns! If you fire one more shot, if you even try to escape, I'm hurlin' this nice little ornament right in the middle of all o' you!"

One of the outlaws raised his .45 to fire, but another leaped at him and pulled down his gun arm.

"Stop it, you fool!" he shrieked. "Do you want us all blown to pieces? Stop it! He's got us! Throw down your guns! That's what I'm doin' with mine!"

He dropped his .45. The rest of the men in the group followed his example.

Pete still stood there facing the gang. The fuse was burning down very close to the stick he held in his hand.

"Teeny! Misery! Vane!" he yelled. "Come up behind these rannies! Throw down on 'em with your guns!"

There was a patter of feet as the two deputies raced up behind the disarmed outlaws. Old Pop Wilkin came puffing along in the rear.

"Drop that, boss!" Misery Hicks yelled frantically. "Drop it! We'll take care o' these c'yotes! Drop that stick o' dynamite!"

Pete Rice grinned. "A stick, pard," he called back. "That part's true enough. But not a stick o' dynamite. You see, it's only a stick o' wood—with a fuse attached to it!"

THE tricked outlaws cursed roundly—but that's all they could do. Teeny and Misery had picked up their discarded guns while Dal Vane and Pop Wilkin kept them covered.

They cursed again as Pete explained to his men how the window sill had broken as he had clung to it, and how when he found the fuse, he hit upon the only possible way to escape from a situation that had seemed like certain death.

"Hombres that try to make out they're tough are generally afraid o' things they don't understand," he said. "Even tough little kids must be held tight if you want to wash their faces, an' you got to run 'em down to comb their hair."

He helped his men truss up the prisoners with handcuffs and pigging strings, and left Pop Wilkin standing over them with a shotgun while he led Vane and his deputies back to the spot where the outlaw had nearly got them with the pair of shots which had aroused the camp.

He walked over and got the lighted lantern and held it over the log which had been the object of his inspection before the battle. An ax had been left in a tree near by, and Pete took the ax and split one end of the log.

The deputies' eyes bulged as Pete pointed to the rolls of greenbacks wadded inside of oiled-silk wrappings in the interior of the hollowed-out log.

"This means that the real counterfeiters got a camp farther up the river," he said. "This is the way the fake money was sent down the river to these supposed loggers. The net was to make sure that none slipped by. An' now we'll just make an inspection o' this entire camp. Light a couple more lanterns, boys."

The lawmen inspected the various cabins. In the smallest one, back from the river, the found Cal Nicholl, lying bound and gagged in a bunk. Pete cut the ropes, and the fugitive from the law sat up weakly.

"Believe it or not, I'm sure glad you came, sheriff," he said. "I was due to get it in the mornin'. I've sure had one hell o' a time. An' I ain't as bad as you think, neither."

"You picked some bad companions, Nicholl," Pete said sternly. "An' when a dog runs with wolves, it ain't safe to pat him on the head."

He sat down on Nicholl's bunk. "Now, I want the complete an' entire truth about Rufe Tarrant's death. You can give it to me. Remember! The truth!"

"That's what I'm ready to tell," Nicholl said with a sigh. "I didn't kill Rufe Tarrant. I didn't have any love for

him; I admit that much. Rufe was a tight man. He loved money better than anything else in the world—less'n it was more money. But I didn't kill him!"

"What did you high-tail it for, then, Nicholl?"

"I'll tell you all about Tarrant. I was the only hired man Rufe had, you know. I knew a lot about him. I found out he'd been meetin' somebody late at night. One night I hid outside the kitchen window, an' listened. I figured it was somethin' about money—an' I was right. Greedy old Rufe, that had plenty o' dinero, was makin' plans to get a lot more."

"Greedy men never reach their goal," Pete said. "When they get in sight of it, they always move the stake a little farther ahead."

"Well, that describes Rufe, all right. I found out that Rufe was plannin' to buy $10,000 worth o' clever counterfeit bills from this stranger he was talkin' with. I heard them mention the loggin' camp, an' heard the feller tell Rufe that if he ever as much as mentioned that camp, he wouldn't live twenty-four hours."

NICHOLL'S throat was dry, and Pete gave him a dipper full of water from a wooden bucket in the corner of the room. The ranch hand took a long drink and continued:

"At that time I didn't mean to do anythin' more than maybe tell Rufe that I knew what he was up to, an' hit him for a few more dollars a month. But thin's kind o' turned out different."

"You mean you got greedy for some o' that easy money?"

"Well, in a way. Rufe sent me down to Paradise to look over some Herefords. When I got into Agua Fria I had a few snorts o' redeye while I was waitin' for the train. Then I got into a game o' poker with Lafe Morton, o' Jim Carey's spread.

He explained how luck had gone against him. He had lost his own money, and also the small sum that Tarrant had given him for expenses.

"I got sore. I took a room an' told Lafe to wait, that I'd get hold o' some more money. I rode hell-bent back to the spread. I was goin' to tell old Rufe what I knew, an' demand thirty-forty dollars from him."

Pete Rice was listening carefully. His angular jaws worked on his cud of chewing gum.

"Well, when I gets back to the house, I stumbles across Rufe dead from a bullet wound. There was a gun in his hand, but it didn't fool me. I knew Rufe had had some argument with them counterfeiters an' that they'd done him in. Even then I didn't figure on doin' nothin' wrong.

"But I began to think how Rufe had underpaid me for years. I knew he was keepin' a lot o' money on him these days. I went through his wallet, took the bills I found. I rode back to town with 'em, but I had bad luck again, an' lost some more money. Then I quit the game an' got drunk."

Nicholl insisted that he had no idea that some of the bills he had passed over during his second session of poker were counterfeit. He had thought the bills he had taken from old Rufe's wallet were genuine.

At first he had decided to say nothing about Tarrant's death, had planned to have the housekeeper discover it and report it, for no one had seen him return to the ranch house late that night, and he had believed that pretending to know nothing about the murder would be safer for him so far as the counterfeiters were concerned.

But then, while preparing to retire in his room he had seen Pete Rice and his deputies enter the Agua Fria Saloon.

He had sneaked downstairs and had listened from the stairway, in order to

learn from the conversation whether Tarrant's murder had been discovered. When he overheard Pete Rice mention the counterfeit bills, he realized he was in a jam.

He had sneaked back up to his room, escaped by way of the extension roof and the drain pipe, and had taken the speedy horse of the saloon proprietor. He had been drinking heavily, his imagination was inflamed, and it had caused him to do flighty things, he claimed.

"I felt there was enough against me to have folks suspect I'd killed old Rufe," he said. "An' while old Rufe wasn't none too popular, neither was I, an' I know there's always hombres lookin' for the excitement o' a lynchin' bee."

"But why did you head for this loggin' camp?" Pete asked.

"Because it seemed the only chance I had. I had somethin' on these hombres, I thought they'd throw in with me when you rode in after me. They fooled me plenty. They told me to give up, to make thin's look good for them, an' that they'd get me out o' jail that night.

"They got me out, all right, but it was only to get me back here alone an' shut my mouth—with a bullet. It was lucky for me that you came when you did."

"Well, I'm arrestin' you for complicity an' theft, anyhow, Nicholl," Pete told him.

"It's better than danglin' from the end o' a rope," Nicholl said, "an' better than chokin' on a lead pill."

He spoke without enthusiasm. He was a man beaten by his own avarice, but willing to compromise and take the consequences.

Pete motioned to his deputies. "Tie him up again an' put him in with the others," he ordered. "Me, I'm goin' to see that hombre that's willin' to talk, an' find out what I can."

PETE walked down and talked with the trussed-up outlaw that he had knocked out at the river's edge. Like most trapped outlaws eager to clip time from a prison sentence, the man was quite willing to give any possible information.

He spoke in the dialect of the big-city mobster, but he appeared to have a reasonable amount of intelligence, and was aware that he could gain nothing by insolence, while, on the other hand, he might gain something by coöperating with the law.

"I'm tellin' you this," he said, "because I guess you know it anyhow. An' maybe when all this is over, you might help me get the breaks. You got a long trip ahead o' you, pal, before you get to the big boss's camp up the river."

The main camp, he went on to explain, would mean a trip of at least a full day by horse and boat. Where the uptrail along the one passable bank of the river petered out, there was a boat hidden beneath a shelf of rock, the prisoner said.

There had been little personal communication necessary between the two camps, as the bogus bills had been floated down to the lower camp in hollowed-out logs. But naturally there had been times when the big boss had to visit his henchmen downriver. At such times he used the boat.

"You could get that boat an' row upstream about ten or twelve miles," the prisoner said. "I'm givin' you everythin' straight, an' if you come through all right, don't forget the guy that put this information on the line for you."

"How many men are up in that camp?" Pete asked.

The prisoner did not know exactly. He believed there were six. There had been six at the time of his only visit to the upriver hide-out. But these comparatively few men could put up a terrific battle, he claimed, as they had a

Tommy-gun and a supply of tear bombs.

"They only got a couple of tear bombs," he said. "They was goin' to take more from here on the next up-river trip."

"From here?" Pete asked. "You've got tear bombs here?"

"You said it!" was the answer. "There's half a dozen of 'em stored in the back o' that dynamite shack."

Pete stood up. "O. K., hombre. If there ain't any murder charges against you, I might be able to do somethin' for you when you come to trial," he said.

THE balance of the night was spent getting ready for the long trip upriver. The tear bombs were taken out of the dynamite shack. Pete Rice believed in fighting fire with fire.

His first plan was to send one of his deputies back to Agua Fria for a posse. But Vane believed the counterfeiters might have spies in Agua Fria. If word once got out that the law was on the trail of the crooks, the spies might find some way of getting the news to the big boss upriver.

So it was finally decided to leave Old Pop Wilkin in charge of the trussed-up prisoners—a job that Pop looked forward to with relish. He was supplied with two shotguns, several rounds of ammunition, and one of the tear bombs, in case the prisoners got disorderly.

"They're tied up good an' tight, Pop," Pete told him. "Your job is to set out here in front o' the shed an' just take a good rest. They won't bother you. If they get noisy, or try any trickery at all, just toss one o' them tear bombs inside an' let 'em have a good cry."

The prisoners were fed by Pete and his deputies. "Better eat hearty," Pete told them. "For this is the only chuck you're goin' to get till we come back."

It was almost dawn when Vane and the lawmen were ready to start up the River of No Return.

There was always the chance that *they* would not return. They faced a desperate job. But facing desperate jobs was all in the day's work for men who rode for the law.

CHAPTER XIV.

KILLERS' LAIR.

THE trail along the river bank was reasonably passable for the first eight miles or so. Then the trees and brush grew right down to the river's edge; and long detours were necessary before the lawmen reached the shelf of rock where the boat was cached.

They staked their horses a few hundred yards from the river, putting them on long ropes so that they could graze. They watered them, for the horses would be without water until the lawmen returned.

It was afternoon before rifles, lariats, ammunition and the tear-gas bombs were stored in the skiff and the water end of the trip was started.

Pete took the long pole that had rested beside the large skiff, and Teeny Butler took his place at the oars. Together they managed to float the craft and work it out into the current.

They were caught in a swirl which threatened for several minutes to capsize them. But the terrific strength of Teeny Butler and the agility of Pete finally won out. Then, despite the strong current, they gathered headway slowly.

At three in the afternoon they had crossed the county line, Pete believed. But the sheriff of Buzzard Gap did not stop at formal boundaries. The men up in that hide-out were counterfeiters and killers.

Pete Rice meant to bring them back, whether it was technically legal or not. "Law is one thing," was one of his sayings, "an' justice is another. O' the two, give me justice."

The stream wound through pictur-

esque canyons, the walls of which at times rose nearly a mile above the water. On both sides, for many miles, stretched a primitive country that was seldom even visited by the most venturesome hunters or fishermen.

Turns were taken with the sweeps. Vane proved to be an accomplished oarsman, and more than once the agility of little Misery Hicks with the pole saved the boat from being swamped.

The lawmen fought hard for every mile they put behind them. Whenever possible, they poled the boat into the shallows near the west bank and rested. Their clothes were wet with sweat, and fatigue lined their faces. Darkness descended with much of the trip still ahead of them.

They ate the lunch that they had packed at the downriver camp, refreshed themselves by dousing their faces with river water, and prepared for the final leg of the trip.

Along this part of the passage, with frowning walls of granite on either side, the blackness was positively inky most of the time. A moon came out, but it was misted over, and the visibility was far from good. Big, saw-toothed rocks appeared in the bed of the stream from time to time. White water seethed about them.

PETE took a turn at the oars, with Vane working the pole to guide the boat away from destruction. When the rocks became more frequent, Misery Hicks worked the sweeps, and Pete Rice stood in the bow with his lariat in his hand.

Progress was made from time to time when Pete snaked out the long rope, looped one of the big rocks many feet ahead, and, with the aid of the herculean Teeny Butler, hauled on the rope and pulled the skiff upstream.

They passed the worst of the rocks, but found new dangers. From time to time the boat was rocked as logs, sweeping down the river, bumped against the sides and made the none-too-stanch craft ship water.

It was obvious that the men in the camp sent the hollowed-out logs downstream only at night. Extreme care had to be taken along this passage. Progress was slow, and Pete looked at his watch from time to time.

"We got to make that camp before dawn," he said. "It 'u'd be silly to attack a stronghold like that by daylight. If we just can't make it, boys, it means layin' over a good many hours till darkness comes again. In that case, I'll be sorry for them outlaws without food. But I'll be a heap sorrier for our hosses, left without water."

But the logs became less frequent a few hours after midnight, and a part of the river had been reached that was calmer. The worst of the trip seemed over.

Pete took one of the long oars and handed another to Teeny. "Accordin' to these bearin's," he said, "there's about half an hour's stiff rowin' ahead. Come on, pard. We'll give it all we got."

The sweat spurted from their foreheads, ran down their faces. At the end of ten minutes, Misery and Vane relieved Teeny and Pete, who then took the sweeps again and bent their backs in long, powerful strokes.

It was twenty-five minutes after three when Pete Rice peered at the strange formations on the wall of rock that towered to the east, then got to his feet and grasped the long pole.

"This is where we beach the boat, boys," he said in a low tone. "No talk from now on, boys. If I'm right on these bearin's, that cave is about four hundred yards ahead!"

TEENY BUTLER carried the rifles as they sneaked along the narrow trail that time had hewn in the rocky bank about two hundred feet above the water. Pete Rice and

Vane carried the tear bombs between them.

The sheriff walked slightly in the lead. At each curve in the trail he stopped and waited, and peered cautiously around the turn. It was no time to take chances.

Even up in this almost impregnable fortress, there would be some kind of watchman or lookout. If they could get that lookout quickly and quietly, the job they had set for themselves might not be so great; if the lookout alarmed the camp, the River of No Return might once more live up to its name, so far as the lawmen were concerned.

At the fourth turn, Pete peered around cautiously, made out some sort of cavelike opening in the rocky cliff just at a sharp turn in the river. There was a modified glow within the cave. It came, presumably, from a partially masked lantern.

"That's the hide-out, all right," Pete whispered. "If they're sleepin', then this is goin' to be easy. We'll ease ahead here, a few feet at a time."

He led the way. The narrow ledge was obstructed by great boulders. At times the lawmen could weave their way around them; at times they had to climb over them.

They were within about thirty feet of the opening of the cave, and Pete was motioning to his men to make ready for the final charge, when there was a flash

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RICE—5

at the edge of a cave. A rifle bullet spatted against a boulder close to Pete.

"Down, men!" Pete yelled. "Only one way now! Slam it into 'em!"

Already his own .45s were spouting flame. The excitable Misery Hicks started to climb over one of the boulders when suddenly Pete leaped up and slammed him hard down on the rocky trail. The sheriff had seen the snout of a machine gun poked through the opening in the cave.

A split-second later, its death rattle roused the wild life on either bank of the stream. Birds squawked, and the lawmen could hear the flutter of their wings. From somewhere to the west came the call of alarm of a mountain lion.

Pete Rice and his men lay prone back of the boulders. Pete could see the reflection of those machine-gun flashes within the cave. He could hear the slugs rattling against the boulders like hail.

THE glow had disappeared from the cave now. The men inside the cavern had doused the light. But Pete Rice took a chance to crawl through the darkness several feet to the right. He found another boulder for shelter, but it was smaller.

It seemed balanced almost on a pin point. If the machine-gun bullets dislodged it from its base, Pete knew that it would be only seconds before his body would be perforated like a sieve.

Yet he stuck to his perilous position, for he was now perhaps four feet higher than the top rim of the cave. He was waiting for the first break in that death rattle. He believed the machine gunner would soon have to slip another drum in.

Yet the bullets seemed inexhaustible. The shooting continued for minutes. The gunner was spraying the bullets all about the rocky bank.

Pete finally figured out the system of the gunner. The latter would start at the right, spray the small boulder with a shower of potential death, then sweep the muzzle around to the left. The slugs were chipping the boulders and kicking up puffs of dust. Powdered rock plopped down into the stream just below.

Pete heard the hail of death against the boulder in front of him. He tensed himself. He saw dust puffing up just to the left of him. The machine gunner was swiveling the muzzle around. And at that instant, Pete Rice took a desperate chance.

He peered around the rock, saw the quick-winking flashes at the muzzle of the machine gun, quickly gauged where the gunner would be lying.

The sheriff snapped five quick shots, spraying them around the machine-gun flashes. There was a break in that chatter of death. The machine gunner had evidently been hit. Yet any second one of the other men might replace him.

It was a time for quick action. Pete Rice got to his knees. He peered over the boulder. He reached for one of the tear-gas bombs, drew back his arm. The death rattle sounded from the cave again, and dust and powdered rock gusted into Pete's eyes as the machine gunner tried to get the range.

But Pete Rice had already gotten the range to the cave. His hand swept forward. The object that had been clenched in his fist sailed out in a short parabola.

It struck just inside the cave. White, feathery puffs went kiting up from it as it exploded. Streaks of ribbed smoke floated slowly out. There was a yell of fury and dismay within the cave. The chatter of the machine gun suddenly ceased.

Dal Vane had risen from back of his protecting boulder, and was hurling a pair of tear bombs in quick succession. Pete hurled another. Choked yells came from within the cavern, and one

man, his arm across his eyes, staggered out to the ledge in front of the cave. Misery Hicks' gun snarled, and the fellow went down with a bullet through his thigh.

Pete hurled the final tear-gas bomb. It practically ended the battle. The counterfeiters stumbled out on the ledge. In an instant, Pete had vaulted over the intervening boulders and was on the ledge. His men were at his heels.

The sheriff's .45 came up. The barrel cracked down over a skull. The man fell heavily.

Teeny Butler's big fist crashed against the jaw of another, who crumbled to the ground. A third wrestled with little Misery Hicks, but finally, in agony from the tear gas, broke away, staggered along drunkenly, and toppled from the ledge to the sharp rocks far below.

"Lay off!" came a choking voice. "Lay off! Give us some fresh air! You've got us! Lay off!"

The battle was over. Five minutes later, four of the counterfeiters lay trussed up on the ledge to the right of the cave. One, shot through the thigh, moaned as Pete Rice tried to dress his wound in the unsatisfactory light of a lantern. The sixth outlaw was dead. He was the one who had toppled from the ledge to the sharp rocks below.

IT was full daylight before the fumes of the tear-gas bombs had cleared from the cave sufficiently for Pete and his men to explore it.

The stacks of bogus bills and the plates would be taken by Dal Vane for government inspection and investigation. Later, he would wire from Agua Fria for instructions as to what to do with the intricate presses.

He shook the hand of Pete Rice as the lawmen stood on the ledge outside the cave and looked at the gorgeous sun climbing the heavens to the east.

"This is a perfect clean-up, sheriff," he said. "I don't know what I'd 'a' done without you and your men. This isn't just a government 'Thank you.' That'll come later."

Pete Rice put up his left hand, wiped his eyes. There was still a slight taint of the tear gas in the fresh mountain air.

"Aw, that's all right, Vane," he said. "We're takin' your orders as to how to stow these plates in the skiff. We'd better get downstream an' see to them other prisoners. Yes, sir! This is the River o' No Return, but we'd better get returnin' from it pronto. I reckon them hosses of ours could enjoy a little snort o' fresh water."

THE END

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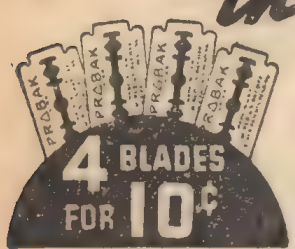

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PROBAK JUNIOR

When Ross Drennan

LOCKED HORNS

with a killer, he found it tougher than any steer he'd ever bulldogged!

A Novelette

By Hal Field Leslie

"YOU lie, Drennan!"

Like the vicious crack of a blacksnake whip, those three fighting words lashed out above the evening hubbub in the Alamo Saloon.

Talk and laughter gave way to a sudden, breathless hush. Clink of glasses—rattle of chips—slap of cards—all sounds died in a tingling silence.

A hundred curious eyes swung

sharply toward the corner table, where young Ross Drennan sat facing the flushed and furious Texan who had whipped out at him those three hot words.

Three words—and men have died for less!

Under the sting of them, Ross Drennan's rangy back had gone suddenly stiff as the ramrod of a buffalo gun. Beneath the dusty brim of his Montana peak Stetson, his lean, bronzed countenance was tight in every muscle. Between narrowed lids, his gray-green eyes were fairly smoking.

But strangely, for some reason of his own, Ross Drennan made no play for the walnut-handled .45 that hung in slick black leather holster at his left thigh. He sat tense and rigid, with both his sinewy hands clamped hard upon the table's edge. White knuckles under taut, brown skin betrayed the desperate effort he was making to hold himself in check.

"I say you're a liar, Drennan!"

Again the Texan's voice lashed out across the table. And still Ross Drennan made no move. His gray-green eyes held steadily the Texan.

Overhead, under the glow of hanging lamps, thick blue skeins of tobacco smoke drifted lazily. Nothing else within the four walls of the big bar-

room moved. The silence that held the place in its grip was tense, electric.

Crimson fury began suddenly to surge on the ruddy countenance of the young Texan. Seeing it, men nearest the table made quiet haste to edge away, to open a clear path behind Ross Drennan—a lane for the Texan's lead to travel.

But no man's gaze left those two who faced each other across three feet of table top; for between them stark, raw drama—or maybe tragedy—was in the making!

UNTIL this fateful evening—evening of a day when half a dozen trail herds, up from Texas, had hit the Abilene shipping pens—Ross Drennan and the Texan had been utter strangers to each other.

Ross Drennan was a lone rider, a top hand down from the Northern ranges, with a year's saved wages in his pocket. Down for no other reason than to have himself a look at this hell-roaring town of Abilene, Kansas.

Here railroad steel met the end of the long and weary cattle trail from Texas; and in this union was spawned all the hates and greeds and passions of men gathered from the four corners of the continent.

And here the notorious "Wild Bill" Hickok held sway as town marshal. Wild Bill Hickok, one of the deadliest gun slingers ever known to the frontier. A lawman who ruled, cock of the roost, by virtue of an all-too-ready trigger finger.

Colorful rumors of these things, drifting north, had pricked Ross Drennan's curiosity, roused in him a keen desire to see Abilene as soon as possible. So he had rolled his soogans, screwed the rig down on his rawboned sorrel, and hit the breeze.

Little did he suspect, as he came leisurely down the long miles, that he was destined to be caught in one of fate's grim twists, at the end of the longhorn trail.

AN hour ago, Ross Drennan had been standing just within the wide-open doorway of the Alamo Saloon. Standing there alone, unnoticed, viewing with quiet curiosity the teeming activities of the big barroom.

The place was crowded, rioting with talk and coarse laughter, noisy with the rattle of bar glasses and the clatter and clink of poker chips and silver dollars.

Here life was flowing wild and free Here the riffraff of the frontier rubbed elbows with honest and substantial men. Here level-eyed cattleman fraternized with suave buyers from the North. And here an oocasional gaunt buffalo hunter, picturesque in fringed buckskin, trailed his long rifle expertly through the crowd.

Ross was standing there, watching this restless mill of humanity, when a rider came in from the dark street and paused alongside him.

Out of the corner of an eye, Ross appraised the newcomer.

He was young—no older than Ross himself—and that was twenty-three. Dust of the longhorn trail was still upon him, upon the wide brim of his weathered, gray Stetson, upon the burr-tangled Angora's against which nestled a holstered .44.

For a moment the young Texan surveyed the crowded barroom; then his gaze swung to Ross.

Ross turned, met fairly the Texan's scrutiny. Met blue eyes twinkling in a ruddily handsome face—a face grinning with wide-open friendliness.

That grin did something to Ross Drennan—perhaps because the other was so near his own age, and perhaps because Ross did feel a little lonesome among the surge of life all about. He smiled back at the Texan.

Out of no more than this, a smile and a grin, acquaintance clicked like a roulette ball dropping home.

"Name's Caldwell," said the Texan. and his voice was a slow and pleasant drawl. "Asa Caldwell, from 'way down yonderly."

"Mine's Drennan. My friends call me Ross. Montana bred."

Their hands met. Then Caldwell swung his interested attention on the crowded barroom.

"Lively spot," he observed. "What say we give her a whirl?"

"Meaning what?" asked Ross quietly.

Caldwell laughed genially. "I reckon a drink wouldn't go bad, for a starter."

Ross shook his head. "Thanks, but I don't never mess around with hard liquor."

Caldwell shot him a quick look, a little surprised. Then he grinned.

"I ain't asking you to, partner. You can irrigate with soft drink, if you're so minded. It's keno with me, so long as we lift a few together. Come on."

THEY found places at the crowded bar. Ross ordered lemon pop. Caldwell ordered whisky. His hand, pouring the drink, was quick with unrestrained eagerness:

Over his lifted glass, Caldwell grinned at Ross. "Mud in your eye, old-timer. Drink hearty!"

Ross was suddenly aware of the smell of previous drinks on Caldwell's breath. Aware, too, of a definite lack of strong character in the contours of the Texan's ruddy face. A little headstrong, Ross judged him to be, and too weak-willed for his own good.

However, Ross's first instinctive liking for Caldwell held firm. Ross had knocked around enough to learn that no man is without shortcomings of one kind or another. His own greatest fault, was the blazing temper that went hand in hand with the crisp red hair under his Montana peak Stetson.

Not perfect himself, he could overlook the weaknesses of another—until such time as that other should prove himself unworthy of friendship.

Caldwell downed his drink, poured himself another, and then began to talk about himself.

"Landed my longhorns here in Abilene this morning. Had plenty of hell on the trail, too! Comanches took half of 'em. A norther froze the rest—all but *twenty head!* Sold 'em to a government man this afternoon, paid off my boys, and now I reckon they're seeing the owl somewheres around town. I aim to do likewise, partner!"

"Just how?" inquired Ross, curiously. The thought was with him that this young Texan was going to need some looking after before the night was done.

Caldwell didn't answer at once. He tossed off his second shot of Abilene redeye, paid for the drinks with silver coins, and swung his back to the bar. His eyes, sweeping over the gambling layouts, were agleam with eagerness.

"There's money in my pocket, just a-honing for action and for increase. You pick the game, partner, and we'll ride her bareback!"

Ross surveyed the various house games — roulette — faro—poker—presided over by pasty-faced men with hard eyes and nimble fingers. Slowly Ross shook his head.

"Only way to beat 'em, is leave 'em plumb alone," he said, gravely. "Better keep your feet on the ground, Caldwell—they'd throw you, good and plenty."

"I've been riding a hard trail and I aim to cut loose my dog," declared Caldwell stubbornly. "I'm playing!"

Ross knew it was no use to try to dissuade the headstrong Texan. He was in that reckless mood when nothing less than bucking his luck would satisfy him. Once started, Ross figured, he'd likely be easy meat for the gamblers. Ross hated like the devil to see Cald-

well lose his hard-earned longhorn money.

"All right, Caldwell," he said, abruptly. "You crave some action—you're going to have it. I'm taking you at your word, picking the game. It'll be jack pot, Caldwell—a little private game, just between you and me."

Caldwell stared at him. Ross laughed easily. "I've got a year's wages in my pocket. You'll get a run for your ante."

The Texan grinned. "That's what I'm looking for, partner. Let's go!"

They bought chips at the house bank, found a vacated corner table, and sat down to play. On the cut, Caldwell won the deal.

Ross little suspected, as the Texan slapped the first card down upon the table top, into what grim trouble this friendly game was going to lead.

CHAPTER II.

ACE OF DEATH.

ALTHOUGH gambling, as such, was against Ross Drennan's principles of clean living, he was no novice at cards. Ordinarily, he left them strictly alone. He had let himself into this game, only to save some one he liked from being cleaned by professional gamblers.

He figured a session of jack pot would give Caldwell the action he craved, without costing a great deal. If Ross should win, he intended, somehow, to turn back to Caldwell his losings. And if Caldwell should be the lucky one—well, he reckoned he wouldn't miss the few dollars lost in a good cause.

They played a two-bit limit. At the end of half an hour both stood about even. Caldwell had become so absorbed in the game, that he han't bothered to order any more drinks. But there was in him a growing impatience. Finally he threw down his cards in disgust.

"This is a kid's game, partner," he said, irritably. "Either we take off the lid, or I'll hunt a man's play!"

Ross hesitated. Then, against his better judgment, he said quietly:

"All right, Caldwell. She's off."

Higher stakes quickened Caldwell's interest. He played with headstrong abandon. Luck was against him. At the end of fifteen minutes he was out of chips.

He bought more, lost these, and bought again. He continued to lose quite steadily. And Ross was suddenly aware of a change coming over him. There was a look of desperation deep in Caldwell's eyes.

Cleaned again, he got up abruptly from the table. "Sit tight," he said. "I'll be back in a minute."

More than a little concerned, Ross watched him go to the bar, toss off a raw drink, then go to the bank. He came back with a load of chips, shoved them to the center of the table, and said grimly:

"I had five hundred when we started, partner. You've taken me for half of it. Here's the other half. You game to match it, one hand for a showdown?"

Before Ross could answer, a man stepped up to the table and placed a hand on the Texan's shoulder. He was a gaunt and grizzled old trail rider, with mild, blue eyes shadowed by the dog-eared brim of a rusty, black hat. His leathery face was eloquent with anxiety.

"I been watching you, Asa," he said, softly. "Ain't this gone about far enough?"

Anger flamed in Asa Caldwell's face He shook away the old man's hand from his shoulder.

"You mind your business, Thad!" he snapped. "I don't need any nursing from you—I can take care of myself!"

"Yes, yes. I know," said the old man, patiently. "But you can't afford to lose no more money. You've lost too much

already. It would jest about break Ora's heart if you——"

"Shut up! You're paid off, ain't you? Whose money is this, anyway?"

"Yours, of course—and Ora's. I'm tellin' you, Asa——"

Caldwell half rose from his chair. The old man gave back a little. Caldwell was mad clean through.

"You're telling me nothing!" he gritted. "You're fired—understand! Now get away from here and leave me alone!"

THAD'S mouth opened; then it snapped shut like a sprung trap—but there was a hurt look in his kindly eyes. Without a word he backed away, until he brought up against the near end of the bar. And there he stood, watching.

Caldwell paid the old man no further attention. He sat full down in his chair and faced Ross.

"Well?" he demanded. "You game to match those chips for a show-down?"

For the moment, Ross made no answer. He was building on old Thad's words a mental picture—a picture of Caldwell's wife waiting on a far Texas spread for Caldwell to return with money that evidently was badly needed.

Ross was glad, now, that he had done as he had. But now he was in a quandary. He couldn't refuse the Texan a chance to break even. But if Caldwell should win, he likely would be headstrong enough to take the entire roll and buck some gambler's game—in which he'd be lucky not to lose his shirt.

Only way to stop him, would be to clean him, right now, then turn the five hundred over to old Thad for safe keeping. Ross made his decision quickly, on the hunch that his own luck would hold through.

Ross shoved all his chips—except the fifty dollars' worth with which he had started the game—into the center of the board.

"You're on, Caldwell," he said, crisply. "Cut for deal."

Caldwell won the deal. His fingers were shaking a little as he picked up the deck, shuffled, and prepared to deal the show-down. Ross caught a fleeting glimpse of the bottom card. It was the ace of spades.

Up until this final hand, Ross hadn't cared about winning. Now, more than anything else in the world, he wanted to take this show-down pot. His gray-green eyes watched narrowly the fall of every card.

The Texan dealt slowly, face up. And now eight cards were down. Ross had an ace and three queens. Caldwell had two pair—jacks and aces. So far, the pot belonged to Ross. He looked quickly up at Caldwell.

The Texan was hesitating over the last two cards. His face was flushed. And in his eyes Ross caught once again that look of growing desperation. Slowly he dealt Ross his last card. It was a deuce.

Ross smiled. "I'm still on top, Caldwell. But you've got a chance. A jack will do the trick."

"Yeah," said Caldwell shortly. "Or an ace." As he said this, he glanced quickly toward old Thad.

Involuntarily, Ross glanced that way, too. The old man was still standing at the bar's end, watching them intently. As quickly as he had looked away, Ross looked back at Caldwell—but not quite quickly enough to catch the off-trail move with which the Texan dealt himself his own last card.

It was the ace of spades!

"Full house!" exulted Caldwell, and reached for the pot.

For the moment, Ross couldn't believe his own eyes, couldn't believe that the Texan would have stooped to such crookedness. Then Ross's red-head temper began to flame. But he held himself in check, halted the reach of Caldwell's hand with a sharp word:

"No! No, I reckon not! That ace of spades done come off the bottom of the deck!"

Caldwell's face went white. Then the flush returned, deeper than before. He was caught flat-footed, and he knew it. For a moment he stared at Ross, his lips working.

And then it was, that he whipped out at Ross the stinging accusation that stilled all activity in the big barroom:

"You lie, Drennan!"

HANDS on the table's edge, holding hard, Ross Drennan faced the flushed and furious Texan—faced trouble, if ever a man faced it. Caught, cornered, desperate, Caldwell was taking the only way out.

"I saw you're a liar, Drennan!"

Here was reason enough for any man to go for his iron. But Ross made no play for the .45 holstered at his left thigh. His smoking, gray-green eyes held steadily the Texan. He hoped Caldwell would cool down in a moment or two.

But Caldwell didn't cool down. Ross saw—as did every other watching man in that silent barroom—the crimson fury that suddenly began to surge in the ruddy countenance of the young Texan—killer's fury.

Even then, Ross tried to talk him out of it. "Get a grip on yourself, Caldwell!" he said, tensely. "I understand Wild Bill Hickok don't take kindly to gun play in this man's town!"

"Hell with Hickok!" gritted the Texan. "You're taking back what you said!"

"Not whatever!" averred Ross grimly.

"Well, then—maybe this will persuade you!"

Under cover of the table, Caldwell had made a neat draw. The muzzle of his .44 slid above the table's edge, covering Ross.

"You taking it back?"

"No!"

Fury shook the Texan. Ross saw his eyes narrow—sure sign of reckless, deadly intent. With desperate swiftness, Ross flung himself aside.

Wham! Across three feet of table top, the Texan's iron blasted. The slug raked Ross under the right armpit.

Both surged to their feet. Ross saw the muzzle of the .44 swinging on him. With a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach, Ross went for his own iron. Either that, or take the Texan's next slug in his own body.

Gun thunder rocked the big barroom. The two weapons had tongued almost as one. But Ross had shaded the Texan by the merest fraction of a second. Caldwell's bullet went wide. The slug from Ross's .45 had smashed fair through the Texan's breastbone.

For a brief moment Caldwell swayed on his feet. Then his iron dropped from nerveless fingers; he lurched forward, sprawling upon the table top—fair atop the pile of chips he had hoped to win by cheating.

Sick at heart, Ross slowly holstered his smoking iron. He wasn't thinking of himself, of possible consequences; he was thinking of that far Texas spread, where some one waited for a smiling rider who never would return.

Tension in the big barroom snapped like a breaking string. A buzz of comment filled Ross's ears. Above it, he heard behind him the crisp and purposeful tread of heels moving toward him from the doorway.

He swung quickly, found himself face to face with a quietly dressed, arrow-straight man, whose brown hair swept the shoulders of his black coat. A man who moved with the sleek and easy grace of a mountain cougar. An armed man, whose dark and piercing eyes probed him through and through

Wild Bill Hickok! Like a white-hot iron, that certainty seared itself on Ross Drennan's brain!

Ross had no slightest doubt that he was face to face with the famed marshal of Abilene. Wild Bill, whose reputation for dealing with killers had traveled far and wide. Wild Bill Hickok, who would rather shoot down a law breaker than bother to arrest him!

CHAPTER III.

KILLER'S BRAND.

ROSS DRENNAN realized full well that he was in a tight spot. He had tried his best to avoid trouble with the headstrong young Texan; had only gone for his gun at the last moment, in self-defense. But would the gun-slinging marshal give him a chance to explain this—or would he shoot first and ask his questions afterward?

For a long, long moment the piercing eyes of Wild Bill Hickok drilled into Ross Drennan's gray-green eyes. Then the marshal flung a quick, sharp glance at the body sprawled on the table top, and another at the thin telltale wisp of smoke seeping up around the walnut butt of Ross's holstered .45. The marshal's darkly handsome face grew suddenly hard.

"We don't like killers in this man's town," he declared grimly. "Go ahead and try your luck on me!"

Once again the big barroom was filled with a breathless hush. Ross stood rigid as a fence post. He knew the gun-slinging marshal was baiting him. Cold anger began to seethe behind his gray-green eyes—but he realized any show of it, any slightest move, would be signing his own death warrant.

"You're putting the wrong brand on me, marshal," he said, quietly. "I reckon any man has got a right to throw smoke, when it's a matter of saving his own life. I hate to do it, but——"

"Sure," interrupted the marshal. "Seem like it's always self-defense with you killers!"

And then, before Ross could tongue another word, the hand of Wild Bill Hickok flashed holsterward.

"Hold it, Hickok!" rasped out an unexpected voice. "Go easy!"

WILD BILL, hand poised on his gun butt, swiveled with the quickness of a cat toward the speaker at the other end.

It was old Thad, standing erect at the bar's end, with his big Colt revolver jutting from a gnarled fist. The cocked weapon was lined straight at the marshal's chest.

"Goes against my grain, Hickok, to throw a gun on you," said old Thad mildly. "But, by thunder, I don't aim to see you gun that waddie down, without hearing the straight of things!"

Dark passion played for a moment on Wild Bill's face; then a broadening smile swept it clean away.

"Hell, old-timer," he said, easily, "I only meant to cover him while I took his iron."

"Which ain't necessary," averred old Thad. "Ain't a man here, but'll tell you he never drew until he was shot at once."

"That's right, marshal," spoke up a man farther along the bar. And a dozen others echoed his statement.

"Poker trouble?" demanded the marshal crisply.

Old Thad nodded. And Wild Bill said, curtly:

"I'm satisfied. And I'd be a heap more so, if you'd holster that iron, old-timer—whoever you are."

"I'm Thad Morgan, trail boss for the A-Bar-O outfit," said the old man as he rammed home his hogleg. "That's the owner, laying there on the table."

The marshal frowned, jerked his head at Ross. "You know this buckaroo, old-timer?"

"Reckon I ought to," declared old Thad evenly. "He's one of my riders."

Ross gave an involuntary start of sur-

prise. But he recovered quickly, and backed old Thad's puzzling play by keeping quiet.

"All right, then," said Wild Bill, a little irritably. "You and your rider can get to hell out of here, both of you —and take your dead boss with you and bury him. You Texans are more nuisance than you're worth!"

Old Thad nodded, moved toward the table. "Come on, son," he said to Ross. "Cash in them chips, and then we'll take Asa out of here. His hawss is outside."

MIDNIGHT. The camp fire, burning under high stars a mile out from Abilene, cast a ruddy glow upon the mound of raw earth near the A-Bar-O chuck wagon—a mound that marked the final resting place of Asa Caldwell.

Old Thad Morgan sat with his gaunt back braced against a big rear wheel. Ross Drennan was hunkered down on his heels near by. The two were alone in camp. Both were staring moodily into the dancing blaze. Ross's lean, bronzed face betrayed his inward distress of mind.

"Don't let it get too far under your hide, son," spoke up old Thad quietly. "I saw the whole play. Asa rightly had it coming to him."

"But why did he have to make a break like that, Thad? I liked him. I figured him straight, clean through."

"So did I," said old Thad, gravely. "Reckless, but straight. Mighty like a smash between the eyes, seein' him pull that crooked ace on you."

Ross nodded. "Maybe I should 'a' let it ride," he said, bitterly. "But, somehow, I couldn't——"

"No square-shooter could," interrupted old Thad. "I'd 'a' done the same thing, had I been in your boots."

Heavy silence lay for a moment between the two. Then old Thad said: "That money, son—well, I sorta want to talk with you about it. It's rightly yours, of course, but——"

"You take it," interrupted Ross quickly. "Take it along home to Asa's wife. I reckon, from what you said to him back there at the table, she might sorta need it."

"It's needed, all right," declared old Thad, "but not by Asa's wife, because he never was married. Ora's his twin sister. I went to work for their dad, ramroding the A-Bar-O spread, when they was knee-high to a gopher.

"Jim Caldwell was a stubborn old cuss. The bad years hit us hard, but damn' if he'd try sending a trail herd north. Instead, he went and mortgaged his spread, lock, stock and barrel, to a moneyed neighbor—a jasper name of Bart Briggs. Stuck a three-year plaster on the A-Bar-O, for five thousand dollars.

"Jim must 'a' knowed, in his own heart, that he couldn't never pay off that mortgage. But *he* ain't got to worry none about it, now. Hawss pitched him, last winter, and broke his neck. Killed him sudden and complete."

Ross whistled softly. "When's that mortgage come due, Thad?"

"Year from next September."

"Caldwell kept up the interest?"

"That's what I'm coming around to, son. Briggs took out the first year's interest, when he made the lend. Caldwell died before this year's interest came due—leaving Ora and Asa without a cent. Only way we could see, to save the A-Bar-O, was to gamble on shoving a small trail herd north. If we was lucky enough to get 'em through, we'd have the interest money."

Ross plucked a roll of bills from his shirt pocket. "This five hundred of Asa's enough to meet it?"

Old Thad nodded. "Uh-huh. And some to spare."

Ross handed over the money. Old Thad stowed it away, and chuckled grimly.

"This ain't going to please Bart Briggs," he observed. "Not whatever!"

"Why?" asked Ross quickly. "Is Briggs honing to snag the A-Bar-O?"

Old Thad's gaunt face grew suddenly hard in the firelight. "I reckon it ain't the spread he wants, so much as it is Ora. He sorta figures that mortgage will help him throw a loop on her."

"She like him, Thad?"

Old Thad snorted. "Briggs ain't the likable kind! Still, you know how women are, when they figure they got a duty to perform. Jim was always saying as how he wanted the A-Bar-O never to go out of the family. I reckon Ora might come to it, if she had to. She loved her dad, son—same as she loved her brother."

AGAIN silence fell upon Ross Drennan and Thad Morgan. It was Thad who broke it:

"Son," he said softly, "I reckon you think this money matter is the only reason I horned in betwixt you and Wild Bill, run that blaze on him about you being one of my riders. But it ain't. I liked the cut of your timber the minute I laid eyes on you. And I'm tellin' you something:

"The herd we brung up to Abilene was sort of an experiment. If it worked out, we aimed, next Spring, to comb the A-Bar-O and bring up a trail herd that would clean off that mortgage, plumb complete.

"Now, how'd you like to take a job with me, go down to the A-Bar-O as my *segundo*, help bring up the longhorns next year? Which same jog, I'm warning you, is likely to prove mighty troublesome and dangerous. Briggs is no jasper to stand by and see something he wants, slip through his fingers!"

Quick eagerness animated Ross Drennan's face. Then he sobered, shook his head. "I couldn't do it, Thad. I couldn't warm a saddle for the sister of a man I've killed. She'd hate me, every minute."

"She ain't to know anything about it," declared old Thad calmly. "It would break her heart to learn Asa was anything but the clean, straight brother she thought he was. Far as I'm concerned, Asa died of the cholera. It's better that way."

Ross nodded. "But how about the other boys, Thad? They'll talk, don't you think?"

"No need to worry about them," assorted Thad. "Asa paid 'em off, and they quit, every last one of 'em. There'll be only you and me, son, going down the home trail—that is, if you decide to go."

"You bet I'll go!" declared Ross earnestly. "I sure will!"

Bathed in ruddy firelight on the lonely Kansas plains, the old man and the young shook hands—a grip of friendship that was destined to be cemented more firmly still, in strife and gun smoke and bloodshed on the mighty longhorn trail.

CHAPTER IV.

HATRED!

TEXAS.

Winter had gone. Early spring lay like a golden benediction upon the Neuces Valley. The A-Bar-O was humming with activity.

For days, a crew of hard-riding brush-poppers had been combing the draws and thickets, hazing wild-eyed longhorns into the open, bunching them on a flat within easy distance of the ranch buildings.

Smoke of branding fires and the smell of singed hair was in the air; for the work of cutting out and road branding the trail herd that was destined for the faraway Abilene shipping pens, was going into full swing.

Ross Drennan was in the thick of it, doing two man's work with rope and

saddle. His tireless energy, his driving forces as *segundo* to old Thad Morgan, was keeping every sweat-grimed *vaquero* on the jump. His ears were filled with the pound of hoofs and the rattle and clash of tossing horns.

Never had Ross Drennan encountered such bundles of deviltry and meanness on four feet as these lively Texas longhorns. They were creatures born and reared among remote and almost inaccessible thickets of prickly pear. They were wild as deer, and far more dangerous than a wounded buffalo, when cornered. Especially the young bulls, always "on the muscle" and spoiling for trouble.

The combing of the A-Bar-O had yielded about three thousand head of mixed stock—cows, bulls and calves. Among this gathering were several hundred strays from other ranges. Most of these strays wore a deeply burned Lazy B—the brand of Bart Briggs.

Old Thad had notified Briggs that the cut was to begin this day. He had sent word for the Lazy B owner to come over and collect his strays.

Bart Briggs was on hand. Half a dozen of his riders were working through the big herd, cutting out the Lazy B stock. But Briggs himself was taking no hand in the job.

With a cold cigarette stuck in a corner of his thick lips, he warmed leather atop his powerful roan gelding, near one of the branding fires. His dark eyes, set deep under joining black brows, were missing nothing.

He was a big man, this Bart Briggs, and solidly muscled. He was dressed flashily, from the crown of his fawn-colored Stetson to the polished tips of his richly quilted boots. He wore two guns in hand-tooled holsters of Spanish leather. And upon his heavily handsome face was a permanent frown.

Briggs had worn that sullen frown ever since Ross Drennan's arrival on the A-Bar-O. As old Thad had predicted, Briggs had not been at all pleased to receive his interest money. The presence of Ross Drennan pleased his even less. He was watching Drennan now—watching with moody eyes every expert move of the rangy rider from Montana.

Ross was well aware of this. Occasionally, as he shoved his rawboned sorrel among the bawling herd in pursuit of some chosen four-year-old bull, he wiped the sweat from his eyes and glanced at Bart Briggs. Always he found the sullen gaze of the Lazy B owner upon him.

Ross was certain that Bart Briggs considered him a menace to his own plans. This was true enough, Ross told himself grimly—but only so far as bending every ounce of his ability toward getting the trail herd safe through to Abilene.

During the past long months on the A-Bar-O, Ross had grown to care more for Ora Caldwell than he dared to admit, even to himself. That she liked him in return, he couldn't doubt. Old Thad had told him so, repeatedly. And Ora, herself, had betrayed it in a dozen different ways.

But there lay between them a gulf—self-imposed by Ross—in which dwelt the ghost of a friendly young rider with smiling blue eyes. A gulf, so Ross keenly realized, too wide and deep ever to be bridged by any spoken word of his.

IT was verging on toward noon, when Ross spotted Ora Caldwell riding out from the ranch buildings for a look at the herd.

Ross, at the moment, was giving his sorrel a breathing spell. He and old Thad were having a little saddle talk at the branding fire, near which Bart Briggs sat stiffly atop his big roan gelding.

Ora barged directly to the fire, drew her sleek little pinto down to sliding

stop. There was a smoldering gleam in the eyes of Bart Briggs as he took her in from top to toe.

She was a figure worth any man's attention. She rode "straight up," in blue overalls tucked snugly into the tops of tan riding boots. She wore a range shirt of flaming crimson silk, wide open at the throat.

Her honey-colored hair was bound in two shining braids about her shapely head. She was tanned, vital, alive—a true girl of the ranges.

She nodded briefly at Briggs, then swung at once to Ross. Her eyes—eyes so like the twinkling blue eyes of her brother, yet shadowed in their depths with the abiding sorrow of his death—were shining with eagerness.

"Well, Ross, how goes it?" she inquired.

"Slick as a colt's ear," he assured her. "We'll be taking all of fifteen hundred head up the trail, I reckon, and we'll——"

"You'll never get through with 'em," cut in Briggs grimly. "I hear the Comanches are raising plenty of hell this year along the trail."

Ross swung toward the Lazy B owner. His gray-green eyes met steadily the dark, smoldering eyes of Briggs.

"We'll shove 'em through, Briggs," he said, quietly. "We'll haze 'em through to the shipping pens—come hell or high water!"

For a moment the thick lips of the Lazy B owner twitched angrily. Then:

"You sure hate yourself, don't you!" he flung out sneeringly; and with a savage jerk, he swung his roan away toward another branding fire.

SHORTLY afterward, Ora moved on, and Ross went back among the longhorns. He saw Ora pause, to speak briefly with Bart Briggs; then she rode on alone, well out from the flank of the herd.

Her walking pony had covered no more than fifty rods, when Ross saw the brute go suddenly limp. Ora drew rein, got down and lifted a forefoot. Ross saw her trying to dislodge something from the frog—a jammed stone, most likely.

And then Ross heard a sound that jumped his heart clean into his throat. It was the challenging bellow of an angry bull, somewhere out there on the skirt of the herd in Ora's direction.

Ross surged erect in the stirrups. He saw the big bull standing well in the clear, gazing straight at Ora. Against the background of the pinto, her crimson shirt was a vivid splotch of flaming color. The big bull began to paw the ground, and toss a five-foot spread of needle-pointed horns that glinted wickedly in the sunlight.

Swiftly Ross wheeled his sorrel in that direction. But a jam of startled longhorns hemmed him in, brought him to halt. He heard again the big bull's angry challenge, saw the brute's ugly head lower for the charge. With a wild yell of warning, he roweled his rawboned sorrel, smashed into the press of impending longhorns.

Ora heard that warning cry. She looked up, saw the great bull pounding toward her. With nimble coolness, she swung aboard her pinto, loosened her rope, then built a swift loop.

The charging bull was hard upon her. She kneed the pinto aside; her twine snaked out, and she made a quick, tight dally around the saddle horn.

It was a true cast, but in her haste, Ora had built too small a loop to span that spread of horns and snag the neck. The loop hung for a split-second on the far horn tip, then slid down and tightened at the base. The rawhide rope snapped taut.

As if jerked by a runaway locomotive, the little pinto was taken clean off its feet, thrown wildly. The bull went to its knees, his nose plowing sod.

Ora found herself unhurt—but her left leg was pinioned under a stunned and moveless horse. Desperately, she tried to wrench free, but the trap held!

Snorting viciously, the big bull lumbered to its feet. For a moment its anger-reddened eyes stared at the struggling girl. Then its ugly head went down for the goring charge.

By this time, Ross had broken well clear of the herd. His flat-eared sorrel was eating ground in mighty leaps.

Ahead of him, Ross saw Bart Briggs. His big roan gelding was angling in fast. The Lazy B owner was high in the stirrups, swinging a whistling loop.

Behind Briggs, a white hammerhead was pounding sod. Old Thad was hunched far over the saddle horn, his "hawglaig" cocked and ready in his waving fist.

Ross was aware of the yells of other riders converging. But his attention was only for the goal ahead. He knew the Lazy B rope could never save Ora; nor would a bullet be likely to stop the short charge of the infuriated bull. His one intent was to hurl himself between Ora and those horns of death.

Under desperate rowels, the raw-boned sorrel let out another notch. Fifty feet away from the trapped girl, roan and sorrel rubbed shoulders in passing. Ross kicked his feet clear of the stirrups.

The charging bull was no more than six feet away from Ora, when the slamming sorrel cleared girl and pinto on the jump. And at that same instant Ross left his saddle.

His flying leap was straight and true. His muscular hands, wide spread, clamped hard upon the horns of the charging bull. His hundred and sixty pounds of solid bone and sinew drove the brute's nose to the ground.

The big bull stumbled, came to lunging halt. Ross threw himself sidewise. Threw every ounce of his strength into battle. Strained until his muscles were near cracking.

Under the five-foot leverage afforded Ross by those spreading horns, the big bull's massive neck began to twist. Up, slowly but inexorably upward, the rod-nostriled nose was forced. Up, until all of a sudden the big bull's forelegs gave way and its sinewy bulk came toppling down.

Breathing hard, Ross hung on like grim death, until old Thad's blasting gun drove a slug into the big bull's brain.

IT was Bart Briggs who heaved the stunned pinto aside, freed Ora and helped her to regain her feet. But it was Ross Drennan to whom she turned and clung, white-faced and shaken.

Ross stood rigid, his face almost as white as Ora's. Then, compelled by something stronger than himself, his rangy arms went round her and he held her close for one brief moment.

Across her shoulder, he saw the countenance of Bart Briggs. It was black as a thundercloud, twisted with venomous hatred.

Then, without a word, the owner of the Lazy B flung himself atop his big roan gelding and roweled fiercely away toward home.

Later in the day, when they were alone, old Thad spoke to Ross about it.

"Son," he said, gravely, "I reckon you and that Briggs jasper are due to lock horns, some day. I'm warnin' you, he's poison, any way you take him—but I shore do want to be on hand to see it!"

CHAPTER V.

TREACHERY!

LIKE a great dun snake, the A-Bar-O trail herd—eighteen hundred head of rebellious longhorns—moved northward by easy stages across the Texas flats.

It was singing weather. The cattle were not being pushed. There was nothing much for the riders to do, except loll in the saddle and keep the herd grazing slowly in the right direction.

The longhorns were convoyed by twelve men—and by a lone girl with honey-colored hair. She rode her pinto, most of the time, alongside Ross Drennan's rawboned sorrel. Her blue eyes, every time she glanced at her companion, were mistily soft.

Ora Caldwell had looked that way at Ross Drennan, ever since he had risked his own life to save her from the goring horns of the big bull.

At the last moment, Ora had insisted on going north with the drive. Neither Ross nor old Thad had been able to dissuade her. She was determined to pay a visit to her brother's grave.

Ross Drennan was between two fires. He was happy—happier than he felt any right to be—in Ora's company; yet her presence with the drive worried him no little.

For, in addition to the usual hazards and dangers of the long trail ahead, there was the possibility that Bart Briggs might have hatched some black plot to bring disaster to the venture.

Ross rode each day with a wary eye upon the sky line. Each night he spread his soogans handy to the chuck wagon in which Ora slept.

But time rolled on and nothing suspicious happened.

Only minor incidents interrupted briefly the steady progress of the drive. Once, the entire remuda got away from the gawky wrangler and enjoyed half a day of freedom. Once, the baldheaded cook mired the big chuck wagon in a creek bed.

And several times the high-strung longhorns broke into incipient stampedes; but they were neatly checked by old Thad and Ross and the other riders—eight daredevil young Texans, who had been willing to gamble on getting the herd safe through and being paid off in Abilene.

In these golden days and starlighted nights along the trail, there was no hint of any evil brewing.

Then, abruptly, the singing weather turned to rain.

For a long and dismal week, the drenched outfit plodded northward under dark and sluicing skies. It reached, on an evening of slashing storm, a point within one day's drive of the Red River crossing.

Here old Thad called a halt, signaled the boys to "ride 'em down." Point and drag were pushed closer together. The tired longhorns bedded almost at once.

NIGHT clamped down, thick and black.

Ora had gone to bed. Under shelter of a big tarp, stretched out from the tail of the chuck wagon, old Thad and Ross ate a belated supper.

They were finishing off with dippers of hot black coffee, brewed over a smoldering fire of wet buffalo chips, when a lone rider came jogging in from the north. His soggy buckskin proclaimed him a hunter, as did the long-barreled buffalo gun he carried balanced expertly across the horn of his saddle.

Old Thad invited him to light down. His dark, piercing eyes and prominent cheek bones betrayed more than a trace of Indian blood in his make-up. He sat cross-legged at the fire. And over a dipper of steaming coffee, he gave news of conditions at the crossing.

"Started with a cloudburst in the hills a week ago. Set the old Red River a-boiling. Caught half a dozen outfits ready to cross. They've been held up a week. Way this damn rain is keeping up, it'll be another week afore any critter can cross. Them outfits is fretting."

"Notice the brands, did you?" asked old Thad, curiously.

"Shore. "Pitchfork, Box-A, Double Arrow, Lazy B——"

A soft, involuntary whistle broke from Ross's lips. The hunter threw him a quick sharp glance; then he chuckled.

"That Lazy B outfit takes the cake. Only abouft five hundred head in the herd, but the big two-gun hombre what runs it ain't taking no chances. He's got fifteen cowpokes to haze 'em along."

Fifteen men for five hundred head! Ross and old That exchanged significant glances. Each read the other's thoughts: Bart Briggs had thrown that small herd together in a hurry—just an excuse to take the trail, place him ahead of the A-Bar-O drive! The number of hands Briggs had with him argued trouble when the time should be ripe——

Ross heard sounds of movement inside the big wagon. The talk had awakened Ora. She came back and sat down in the shadowy cavern above the dropped tailboard. Smoldering firelight struck glints of gold in her honey-colored hair. The visitor in buckskin stared at her in surprise.

"What's up, Ross?" she inquired anxiously. "Anything wrong?".

"No, I reckon not," he assured her. "Only this man has just come down from the crossing, and he says the Red River is boiling in full flood. We're likely to be held up a week."

"A week!" There was dismay in Ora's voice. She fixed her troubled eyes upon the hunter. "Is that the only crossing? Isn't there some other place, where we could make it without waiting?"

The hunter grinned. "When a lady asks me, I've got to tell the truth. Shore there's another place—but I'm the only one what knows about it. Stumbled onto it a month ago."

Ross frowned. "How come you didn't tip off them other outfits?"

"Ain't got no use for you trail drivers and your damn longhorns!" declared the hunter bluntly. "Your strays are going to breed this country full, afore long. They'll drive out the buffalo, sure as hell. That's why!

"But when it comes to a lady wanting to cross, I might be persuaded." He swung to Thad. "How much is it worth to your outfit?"

Old Thad chewed his lip thoughtfully. The A-Bar-O had plenty of cattle but mighty little money. "Tell you what I'll do," he offered. "I'll give you twenty head of prime four-year-old steers."

The hunter snorted, shook his head. "I'd ruther have me twenty dollars, than your whole herd. Take it or leave it!"

Ross did some fast thinking. If they could get the herd across ahead of Briggs, forget the tallow, then push the longhorns for a spell, unguessed trouble might be avoided.

"How far away is that crossing?" he demanded.

"No more'n thirty miles from —but I ain't saying in which direction. You can make it in two days, and cross your herd the next, safe and slick as a doe's ear."

"All right," said Ross, crisply. "I've got the twenty dollars. If the boss and the owner say so, you lead us to that crossing and earn yourself the twenty."

Ora nodded vigorously. And old Thad said, quietly:

"Yes, I reckon we'll take the gamble."

AT mid-afternoon, three days later, Ross and old Thad and the buffalo hunter sat their horses at the crest of a brushy land roll. Behind them, the big herd was strung out at rest. Before them, lay the swollen waters of a sizable creek.

It had stopped raining, but the sky was darkly ominous with clouds.

The hunter pointed down at the creek. "There she be. She feeds into the Red

River, eight miles down. All you got to do is foller her. The near bank is wide and flat—good trailing for your herd. Five miles farther on, it widens into a nice cove, where you can bed your cattle for the night."

"How about the crossing?" inquired Thad anxiously.

"Easy as pie. The Red'll be wide, but fairly gentle. Put your herd in at the creek's mouth, and head 'em for a big lone cottonwood on the bar bank. Won't be much swimming."

"Aim to see us over, don't you?" demanded Ross.

The hunter shook his head. "Ain't no need. I reckon I'll take my money now, and jog along. I've wasted a couple days on you already."

Ross was disposed to argue the matter. He didn't feel lke trusting entirely to the word of a drifting hunter. But the hunter was stubborn, and finally old Thad intervened. A few minutes later the hunter rode off with his twenty dollars; and shortly the herd was again on the move.

The guide had made straight talk about the creek trail. Five miles down, it widened into a high-shouldered cove, well grassed. It was an ideal place for holding the longhorns until morning.

But Ross was not yet satisfied. He insisted on riding down the remaining three miles, to have a look at the crossing. Old Thad went along with him.

As they drew nearer the Red River, Ross's uneasiness increased. The creek trail still remained fairly wide, but the shoulder had roughened and grown higher. The creek, even in its present flood, began to flow more swiftly and to drop farther and farther below the lip of the trail.

They reached the Red River at twilight. The trail ended abruptly at the brow of a sheer-cut bank, full thirty feet above the boiling union of creek and river!

Here, the river itself was racing madly through a mighty cut, wide and deep and treacherous. Nor was there any sign of a lone cottonwood on the dusky rim.

Old Thad took one look at the sheer drop under the nose of his white hammerhead, and another look at the fearful welter of the Red River, where great uprooted trees were surging and tossing like devilish things alive. Then he turned a wrathful face to Ross.

"Damn that half-breed buffalo skinner!" he exploded. "He done tricked us—took us over for twenty dollars!"

MIDNIGHT.

The starless sky was as impenetrable as thick black velvet, the cove as dark as the inside of a ten-gallon hat.

The entire A-Bar-O outfit was on edge. It was one of those still, breathless nights, when man and beast are restless in the presence of an impending electrical storm.

All evening, the sultry air had been charged with the threat of it. Ross, immediately on his return from the boiling river, had wanted to move the herd back into open country. But old Thad decided against it.

"Right here is the best place for 'em," he declared. "Come a big storm with 'em in the open, it might start a stampede we couldn't strangle. But not here. The creek'll hold 'em on one side, the high shoulder of the cove on the other. All we got to do is split the crew, block the trail at each end of the cove, and we've got 'em bottled."

Good judgment, under ordinary circumstances. But Ross had a persistent hunch that something other than a natural storm was due to break. He cautioned every man to be doubly watchful.

The big chuck wagon stood at the creek bank, near the entrance to the cove. The remuda was rope-corraled near by. The longhorns were on their

feet, restless, jittery. Not much would be needed to set them into panic.

Ora, mounted on her pinto, stayed close with Ross and old Thad. The three walked their horses slowly up and down the creek bank, anxiously watching the lurid play of lightning that had begun away to the southwest.

The storm built slowly. Each faint rumble of distant thunder provoked restless movement among the herd. Each succeeding lightning flash, brighter than the one before, increased the longhorn's growing uneasiness.

Suddenly, at the cove's upper end, a streak of orange flame stabbed darkness. Gun thunder ripped the night wide open.

It was followed closely by a sound, uptrail, that momentarily chilled Ross Drennan's blood—a concert of wild Comanche yells!

Then hell indeed began to pop!

CHAPTER VI.

HELL AND HIGH WATER.

THE noisome uptrail darkness spewed flash and crash of guns, the slogging thunderous pound of hoofs on wet earth.

Brief lightning revealed a compact bunch of riders, hideous in war paint and streaming feather headpieces, swarming down upon the cove's mouth.

In the swift, ensuing blackness, A-Bar-O guns tongued lurid answer beyond the chuck wagon.

Ross Drennan's left hand streaked holsterward. His iron came clear. With a yell of encouragement to the trail's defenders, he swung his rawboned sorrel their way.

Old Thad's hand came swift across blackness, gripped his arm. "No, Ross! You look after Ora!"

Thad's hammerhead pounded away; and, a moment later, the blast of his old gun joined the outfit's guns.

Ross had two thoughts in mind—Ora's safety, and the safety of her longhorns. Lightning showed him the herd, milling and wild of eye. If that mêlée at the cove's mouth should touch off the powder of their nerves, set them into blind panic, the four riders at the lower end could never hold them.

The frenzied longhorns wouldn't stop running until they had poured themselves off the trail's end and into the boil of the Red River.

Ross didn't pause to think beyond this possible grim end to Ora's hopes. Those longhorns must be held!

Ora's pinto was close beside the sorrel. Ross clamped a hand on the smaller horse's bridle, voiced a quick word of warning to Ora, and roweled away toward the cove's lower end.

But sorrel and pinto had taken no more than twenty strides, when the wild, yelling raiders broke through the A-Bar-O defense. In half a breath the cove was a black chaos of yelling, shooting men, snorting horses, and plunging longhorns.

Panic took Ora's pinto. The brute swerved, leaped, tore the bridle away from Ross's grip. Instantly, the two were separated. Ross shouted Ora's name desperately. In the uproar, his voice was drowned. He heard no answer.

Ross surged upright in the stirrups, waited for the next lightning flash. It came swiftly. It revealed no sign of Ora. Frantic, he wheeled his sorrel this way and that through inky blackness, searching for her.

AGAIN a lurid sweep of lightning lighted the sky. It showed Ross two riders close at hand. One was old Thad atop his white hammerhead; the other was a paint-smeared and feathered horseman. Their mounts were pressed rib to rib, and the two were locked in a battling clinch. Ross rammed his sorrel straight that way through a wall of blackness.

Ross's iron was ready to blast death and destruction; but he dared not use it for fear of shooting old Thad. His sorrel collided, swerved. His rangy right arm swept out, encountered feathers. He kneed the sorrel closer; and, a moment later, he had the neck of old Thad's assailant prisoned in the crook of his arm.

Ross dragged the fellow half off his horse, jammed the muzzle of his iron against ribs, and pulled the trigger.

As he let the sagging body slide to the ground, his fingers raked along the jaw. It was covered with thick, wiry stubble. An electric shock of realization tingled through Ross. These raiders were not Comanches—they were white men in masquerade!

"Thad!" he shouted. "Thad! You all right?"

Old Thad was close enough to hear, to recognize his deliverer.

"Yep—all right," he shouted back, voice jerky with quick breathing. "But in case anything happens to me, you get them longhorns through! You——"

Ross couldn't hear the rest of it. A press of frenzied cattle had surged between them, forced him and Thad apart.

Down at the lower end of the cove, guns began to blast with staccato desperation. Ross knew what that meant—the longhorns were trying to break through, the boys trying to hold them by burning powder in their panicky faces!

Desperately, Ross tried to shove through and help. But he hadn't covered fifty yards before his sorrel was squeezed in a press of clashing horns, caught tight in a jam from which there was no escaping.

Abruptly, the gunning down ahead died away, except for intermittent flashes fast retreating down the trail. The dam had burst! Around him, Ross felt the released current of living flesh quiver, go on the move.

Relentlessly, Ross and the sorrel were carried along with it. Faster and faster, until the slogging pound of hoofs was steady thunder in the ear.

It was like being helpless in a boat without oars, carried swiftly in the merciless grip of an accelerating stream, toward a destructive waterfall.

Ross figured he was destined for just that manner of grim end, unless he could manage to work his horse out to the gentler bank of the creek. He tried, but it was no go. Lightning, glimmering sharp on tossing horns, showed him the trail jammed full with stampeding cattle. He had to go with the herd!

Had the herd been in open country, the longhorns would have run themselves out. But there was no chance here; their blind panic could end only in disaster.

Even above the pounding thunder of hoofs, Ross heard the mighty splash as the leaders barged across the lip of the trail's end and hit the boiling Red River. That meant the end of the herd, he thought grimly—and probably the end of himself. There'd be no let-up in that wild stampede until the last fool longhorn had played out that tragic game of "follow the leader."

Almost before Ross realized it, he and the sorrel were at the brink of the plunge. Vivid lightning gave him one brief glimpse of the terrifying chaos down below—a swirling, churning mill of struggling longhorns in angry waters. This much Ross saw; then he and the leaping sorrel were plummeting down through blackness.

By sheerest luck, horse and rider struck an open space among the swirling cattle. Down they went, deep under. Ross had a desperate grip on the saddle horn. He thought the fighting sorrel never would regain the surface.

But finally, when Ross's lungs were near bursting with pent-up breath, the rawboned brute broke up among a press

of struggling longhorns, came clear with a blowing snort.

Then, in utter darkness, aiding the plunging, swimming sorrel as best he could, Ross began a desperate battle against the death that hemmed him in. Not alone for the sake of his own life, but that he eventually might lock horns with the man he suspected was responsible for this night's grim and bloody work—Bart Briggs!

MORNING.

Warm, golden sunlight filled the cove, where last night death and destruction had been rampant.

Death's mark was here now. Half a dozen bodies, each neatly covered with a blanket, lay side by side on the creek bank. Two were the remains of cook and wrangler, trampled almost beyond recognition. The other four had died by bullets—four young A-Bar-O riders who never would see blue Texas skies again.

The big chuck wagon was still standing where it had stood last night. The rope corral was down, the remuda gone. But there were four saddled horses tethered to the wagon's front wheels. One of these was Ora Caldwell's pinto.

Ora herself sat alone just within the wagon's rear opening. Her head was bowed, her face buried in her hands. Her shoulders were shaking with dry sobs.

Four young Texans stood uneasily near by. These were the four who vainly had tried to hold the herd—who, at the last possible moment, had saved themselves by slamming their horses into the creek. They had crashed straight on down the far bank, hoping some slim chance might enable them to save at least a few of the longhorns.

These four had seen Ross Drennan go plunging over the brink.

That brief flash of lightning had been the last one. Far winds had veered the storm sharply away to the southward. No rain had fallen. Within half an hour the moon had come clear. But it had disclosed to the anxiously watching riders, no sign of Ross Drennan or the lost herd in the angry river.

Ora, like those four riders, had found safety in the creek. She had pushed her panicky pinto straight across, taken concealment among the brush of the opposite bank. She had seen, by moonlight, the feathered raiders silently gather up their own dead and go swiftly away, leaving never a trace.

Nor had the returned riders been able to find any slightest trace of old Thad Morgan.

SIX dead men, four tight-faced young riders, and a girl sobbing with heartbreak—these Ross Drennan found, when he came pushing his weary sorrel down the creek trail through the golden morning.

Ross was bareheaded. His gun was gone. His clothing was caked with dried mud. His face was scratched and torn. There was a tired droop to his rangy shoulders.

Also, there was ice in his gray-green eyes, and a permanent killer's twist to his lips.

The ice melted and the twist softened a little, when Ora, with no other word than a single choking cry of thanksgiving, threw her arms around him and held him as if she never meant to let him go.

His eyes froze again and his lips hardened when he heard their stories, heard old Thad was gone.

His own experience was briefly told, in words that gave no hint of the desperate battle which he and his stout-hearted sorrel had put up against the raging river:

"Current took us five-six miles down, I reckon, before we made shore. We rested a spell, and then headed back."

"What you aim to do now?" inquired one of the riders soberly.

Ross's lean jaw stiffened. He wanted, more than anything else at the moment, to slam straight away to the Red River crossing in search of Briggs. But he had another job to do, first—a job that he hoped might eventually bring him to a meeting with the Lazy B owner. He was pretty certain Briggs hadn't risked his own skin in last night's raid.

Ross made no mention of this to Ora and the boys. They all thought the raiders had been Comanches. Just as well. Ross didn't believe in throwing accusations, until he had something definite to go on. This was going to be between himself and Briggs!

"Thad charged me, case anything happened to him, to see the herd through to Abilene," he said, quietly. "I aim to do it. Them longhorns didn't all die in the Red River. A slim few of 'em got ashore. I saw some small bunches this morning. With luck, I reckon we can maybe round up two-three hundred head, and find us a crossing somewheres down below."

CHAPTER VII.

LOCKED HORNS.

ON a wind-swept summer forenoon, long weary weeks later, Ross and Ora and the four riders hit Abilene with the gathered remnant of the A-Bar-O trail herd—two hundred ten husky longhorns.

The outfit was slim—no chuck wagon, no remuda. Only five horses, with bed rolls tied behind the cantles. Ross was wearing a hat that had belonged to one of the dead riders, and carrying the six-gun of another. It was a weapon almost identical in hang and feel to Ross's own lost iron.

Ross had brought the longhorns through in good tallow. He sold them readily and quickly for Ora, at forty dollars a head—enough to pay off the mortgage on the A-Bar-O, pay off the riders, and leave a nest egg with which to carry on.

Ora couldn't quite put in words, her gratitude to Ross. However, she said all that was needful with her eyes—eyes shadowed now with more than the year-long sorrow of her brother's death. The loss of old Thad was keenly felt by her, as well as the loss of those other loyal hands who had died in her service.

Ora wanted now to go directly to Asa's lonely grave. She wanted Ross to take her there at once.

Ross had long dreaded this moment. He had spent many a sleepless night on the trail thinking about nothing else. Now that the moment was close upon him, he couldn't quite bear to think of facing it. Not right now, anyway. He couldn't bring himself to stand out there on the Kansas plain with Ora, knowing that the year-old mound at her feet was built upon a bullet from his own gun.

Something of his mental distress must have shown in his tight countenance, for Ora's eyes widened. She quickly asked:

"Why, Ross—what's the matter?"

"I can't tell it, not right now," he told her honestly. Then, quickly: "Why don't you browse around the stores this afternoon, maybe buy yourself a new outfit? Then take a good rest at the American Hotel. Maybe to-morrow we'll go——"

Ora stared at him, a little perplexed. Then, because this delay was something Ross wished, she gave in.

Alone, finally, Ross promptly went in search of Bart Briggs. He learned, by quiet inquiry, that the Lazy B herd had hit Abilene four days ago—that Bart Briggs had been about town ever since.

However, Ross couldn't locate Briggs. So finally Ross gave it up, decided to try and catch himself a few hours of sleep. He needed it. A clear eye and steady nerves might not come amiss, if

he were lucky enough to reach a showdown with Briggs. The Lazy B owner had a reputation for fast gun work.

ROSS slept longer than he had intended. It was well along into the evening when he awoke. Ora was nowhere about the hotel. So he went again in search of Briggs.

Cold of eye and grim of lip, Ross made the Alamo Saloon his first stop.

The place was crowded, as it had been on that last year's night, when Ross had met up with Asa Caldwell. Among the crowd, Ross failed to catch any view of the man he sought. He moved forward, intending to circulate around the big barroom.

"Drennan!"

Some one behind him had rapped out his name, harsh and crisp. Ross wheeled. Bart Briggs stood just within the doorway. His big hands were hanging easily at his sides, elbows a little crooked. On his heavily handsome face was a catlike leer of triumph.

Ora Caldwell was with him, standing alongside him. Her blue eyes were fixed on Ross. They were different than Ross had ever seen them. They were aflash with cold fires.

"No wonder you tried to keep me from coming on the drive!" she flung out at him. "No wonder you refused to take me to Asa's grave! I know why, now! You killed my brother—shot him down in cold blood!"

"Ora—who told you that?" he demanded, tensely.

"Bart told me," she flung back at him. "He found it out, a day or two ago!"

For a full quarter minute, in tingling silence, Ross stared at Ora. Then:

"Yes, Ora," he admitted flatly. "I did shoot your brother. But did Briggs tell you why?"

"I'm telling her now!" cut in Briggs coldly. "It was over a poker game. Most likely Asa caught you trying to run a blaze on him, and wouldn't stand for it. Asa was that kind. You're a murderer, Drennan!"

Ross Drennan's temper flamed hotly. Only Asa Caldwell, old Thad and himself knew the truth about that poker game. Old Thad was the only man, except himself, who had seen Asa's crooked play. Licked in the matter of the mortgage, Briggs was taking this shot in the dark to bring him down, make him less than dirt under Ora's feet!

"You damn whelp!" Ross lashed out at Briggs. "Before you talk about murder, you better look at your own hands!"

The dark eyes of the Lazy B owner narrowed to gleaming slits. "Meaning what?" he demanded.

"Meaning that night raid on Ora's herd," Ross flung back at him, recklessly. "It cost the lives of seven men—better men than you are, Briggs! Maybe you didn't have a direct hand in it—I doubt if you've got the guts! But you sure as hell did ramrod that job!"

Fury writhed across the heavily handsome face of Bart Briggs. His wide nostrils quivered. Then Briggs made the most serious mistake of his life—his right hand drove furiously toward one of his holstered guns!

WITH ice in his eyes and a killer's twist on his lips, Ross waited until Briggs's gun was almost clear of leather. Then his left hand flashed with dazzling speed for his own iron.

Before the Lazy B owner could line his weapon, Ross's six-gun blasted—not once, but three times, spoke viciously, thunderously.

Ora screamed, just once, and stood frozen with horror.

Thick lips working, Bart Briggs sagged on wilting legs. His big frame swiveled halfway to the right. His right knee caved in. He went down

crashing, his drawn gun hidden under his half-curled and motionless body.

Very slowly Ross Drennan holstered his smoking iron. The killer's twist had left his lips. His job was done.

Then—as if timed in coincidence with a like moment of a year ago—Wild Bill Hickok came striding in from the street. His flashing eyes took in that figure on the floor, took in the uppermost of Bart Briggs's left gun, still holstered in Spanish leather—his only visible weapon.

The marshal's eyes swung on Ross Drennan, took him in from heel to head. Then quick recognition dawned.

"So it's you again! And this time your victim didn't have a chance to draw—let alone take the first blast at you! Well, you got away with it once, but this time I'm taking you in. Give me your iron—handle first!"

Hickok's famed gun hand was poised, ready for instant action. Ross shrugged. "All right," he said, wearily, "she's yours."

He was extending the iron, butt foremost, when he chanced to glance at Ora She was staring at him. He saw nothing but the horror in her eyes—didn't notice the questioning bewilderment that was slowly creeping into her tense, white face.

He couldn't blame her for hating him. But the way she had lashed out at him, on the word of a jasper like Bart Briggs——

This, he realized, was the parting of the ways between himself and Ora.

Bitter recklessness dominated his next move. Swift as thought, as Hickok reached for the proffered weapon, Ross slid his forefinger through the trigger guard. A blurring flip reversed the weapon, lined the muzzle full upon the Abilene marshal. Wild Bill was caught flat-footed by Ross's deft manipulation of the whirling gun trick.

"I've done changed my mind, Hickok," he said, coldly. "I'm going away from here, but you ain't taking me! I'm leaving this man's town, riding a long trail north—but not before I tell you that snake down there on the floor needed killing mighty bad!"

"Needed killing?" inquired the watchful marshal, softly. "How come?"

Brad told him, in crisp words and brief tones. Hickok smiled.

"You got any actual proof to back up what you think?" he demanded.

"Not any," admitted Ross, grimly. "But the way he took it, when I throwed it in his teeth, was enough for me. Turn him over, and you'll find a gun in his hand. No, Hickok, I ain't got any actual proof. But——"

"I have, by thunderation!"

That vigorous interruption had come from the doorway. Every eye in the big barroom swung that way. Ora uttered a choking cry. Ross's pulse began to hammer with fierce gladness—but the weapon covering Hickok didn't waver.

There in the doorway stood old Thad Morgan. Old Thad, gaunt, tattered, trail-weary, but with a gleam of abiding satisfaction in his mild, blue eyes.

The thumb of one hand was hooked in his belt above his holstered gun. The other hand was gripping the end of a taut rawhide rope, which led away into outer darkness.

"Howdy, Hickok," he said, quietly, to the gun-covered marshal. "Seems like I'm always popping up just in time to keep you from going off half cocked—not that there's much danger of it right now!"

Hickok made a wry face. Old Thad grinned. Then he stood a little aside, and threw a curt command back along the taut rope: "Come on in here, you polecat!"

The rope slackened. In through the doorway shuffled a man with dark face and high cheek bones, clad in ragged buckskins. His bound hands were

snagged to the end of old Thad's lead rope.

"I got jammed in the tail of the stampede," explained old Thad to Ross and Ora, "but I done wiggled free. Lightning give me a chance glimpse of this damn buffalo skinner, setting his horse atop the cove shoulder. I took after him—pronto! Chased him almost to Elm Springs afore I ketched him and made him spill the beans. You didn't gun the wrong man, Ross! Briggs and his money was behind the whole business!"

Hickok's dark eyes bored into Thad's prisoner. "That true, man?" he demanded.

The hunter looked fearfully at old Thad, then nodded. "Yep. Briggs paid me a hundred dollars to trap the A-Bar-O herd so's he could fake an Injun raid and stampede 'em into the Red River."

Wild Bill grinned at Thad. "All right, old-timer—you win again." And to Ross he said, dryly. "You can put away that iron, young fellow—you're too damn handy with it to suit me!"

ROSS holstered his iron. Old Thad went straight to Ora. He placed his gaunt hands on her slender shoulders, looked deep into her troubled eyes.

"Ora," he said, gently, "I done seen and heard everything that happened in here, through that open side window over yonder. You was misled by Briggs. I'm mighty sorry to have to tell you, but Asa wasn't quite what you thought him to be."

Then old Thad told her the plain, blunt truth about that card game and the shooting. At the end, Ora's eyes sought Ross; they were hurt, but in them was relief, and the return of that look which Ross had come to know so well.

For a long, long moment, Ora looked that way at Ross. She seemed to be pleading wordlessly for his forgiveness. Then, womanlike, she turned and ran for outer darkness in which to hide her rioting emotions.

Ross stared after her, uncertain what to do. Old Thad decided for him—seized his rangy shoulders and gave him a vigorous doorward shove.

As he went through the Alamo portals into the night, Ross heard behind him the voice of Wild Bill boom out:

"All hands to the bar for a drink on me! And if any jasper wants to bet me there ain't going to be a wedding in this man's town right soon, I'll lay him ten to one!"

Five minutes later, Ross Drennan could have assured Wild Bill Hickok that he was betting on a sure thing.

FREIGHTERS TAXED

FREIGHTING goods into Santa Fe in the days when it was Mexican territory brought fortunes to many a "mule skinner." Such were the profits to be made in this business that the Mexican governor recognized it as a legitimate business worthy of a tax.

And what a tax! In 1839, every wagon of supplies entering Santa Fe had to pay a tax of $500!

But Yankee ingenuity was not to be downed. When a wagon train neared the city, the number of wagons were reduced by burning, or were taken apart and buried, to be dug up on the way back; the goods piled high on the remaining wagons.

As there were no stipulations as to the size of the wagons or the amount they could carry, bigger wagons were built. In this manner, the same amount of goods could be carried for a lesser tax.

A case of being right and wrong at the same time!

DIAMOND SPOT

By Wilfred McCormick

Bear Spring Canyon,
Thursday morning.

DEAR ZACK:

Excuse this letter for being so short this morning, because I am rushing around like a sheepherder dodging a bathtub on account of being in such an awful hurry.

Zack, what I want to say is: you better come over here real quick. I mean, you'd better come, if there ain't another letter from me to-morrow saying that everything is all right again. Because if I don't write in the morning, I expect to be dead.

Hoping you are the same,
Your brother,
TOM HALSTEAD.

P. S. Don't worry none, because I've got both guns oiled up in good shape for old Lem Tucker, and I can whip him with my own fists if he wants some of that, too. T. H.

Bear Spring Canyon,
Friday morning.

DEAR ZACK:

Well, nothing has happened yet, but I sure look for this place to get hotter than a chili pepper in August pretty soon. Just about any minute, too.

Zack, do you remember old Lem Tucker—tall, hungry-looking jasper that usually wears a black sateen shirt and a floppy-rimmed old hat of the same color? Well, in case you don't recall

old Lem to mind, he's the jasper that runs all those Herefords in the next canyon south of me.

Lem used to be a good sort. Him and me has neighbored together for twenty-three straight years. Plenty of argument, you understand, because old Lem's got a head so hard you could straighten horseshoe nails on it without him even flinching.

Anyhow, what I started to say—Lem's gone bad lately. Plumb bad.

He's a regular, low-down calf thief—and that's exactly what I called him, too—a flat-footed, slimy-blooded, fish-faced old son of a drunk rattlesnake—the lowest that ever poked a foot in stirrup leather. Them's exactly the words I turned loose, and I'm here to swear it's gospel truth.

Well, like you can guess, things start popping right away. Quick as I said that, old Lem claws for his gun, but I reaches over and slaps him right on the kisser. I don't know exactly what would have happened next, because his bronc spooked about that time and pitches off down the canyon with him as fast as it can jump.

That's the last I seen of Lem, but "Bigfoot" Martin's kid has just rode over on his burro and says that Lem is ready to shoot me on sight the next time he sees me.

Now, I reckon you remember Lem Tucker? Well, whenever Lem throws one of his mad spells, it usually takes fifty men and forty dogs to get him headed off. And that's just exactly the fix he's in now—mad as a sore-eyed bull in a red shirt factory, and dead set on killing me for exposing his wickedness.

So, if you don't hear from me again to-morrow, you better hurry over and take care of my estate, because if old Lem was the last man in the world, I wouldn't run from the old skinflint, and I'm ready for him—six-gun bullets, or bare fists It don't matter two whoops in hell to me which he wants, either. I'm just that sore myself.

Zack, I just noticed a cloud of dust coming up the trail from his direction, so I am sending the Martin kid on to mail this letter in a hurry.

Don't worry none. The reason this last paragraph looks different is on account of my pencil, which ain't none too good, and not because my hand is shaking any.

Don't worry none, but you better hurry over if I don't write you again to-morrow.

TOM.

Bear Spring Canyon,
Friday afternoon.

DEAR ZACK:

Excuse this letter for coming so quick after the last one, but a lot of water has passed under the bridge since I scribbled them few lines, and the sheriff and everybody has gone, leaving me alone for the time being.

Zack, I feel about as cheap and as guilty as a sheepherder in heaven, the way things has turned out.

Tell you how it happened——

That cloud of dust—maybe I wrote you about it—turned out to be Sheriff Henry Nail. So by the time Henry gets off his horse and strolls up to the front door, I've got my old six-guns hanging on a nail in the kitchen, just like nothing had ever happened to make me want to shoot Lem for being a calf thief.

Well, the sheriff is just passing through, and I ask him to have a bite to eat with me. You know Henry! I reckon the three things he likes best in the world are breakfast and dinner and supper!

Anyhow, it ain't very long till I'm busy putting a pan full of bread in the oven, and Henry is bending over some bacon with a butcher knife.

Then I hear a yell. Without thinking, like some damned greenhorn, I hur-

ried outside to see who's dropped in.

I sure found out!

Old Lem Tucker is setting there by the gate, and his gray eyes looks colder than a dog's nose on a January midnight. He's holding the bridle reins in his left hand, I notice, and his right-hand fingers are caressing the butt of a cedar-handled forty-four that wasn't meant for anything except business.

Old Lem's sandy mustache wriggles some, and directly he starts to talk.

"Tom," he snarls, the words hissing out between his two front teeth like steam from a coffee pot, "I rode over to kill you!"

Well, I wasn't scared much, but the words made my old heart act sorta queer just the same.

"You won't do that," I warns him. "I ain't carrying a gun myself. You can't shoot an unarmed man."

"You're not tied here," he answers. "Go get you a gun—or forty guns! I'll wait!"

"Now, see here, Lem," I argues, real soberlike. "We've got to forget our little trouble for the time being, because——"

"If you won't get that gun," he interrupts, "I'm going to kill me a cowardly dog right now!"

Saying that, he jerks the big forty-four from its holster, and I find myself looking into the wrong end of a nasty pair of sights. I begins edging backward, throwing up one hand. With the other, I point toward the house.

"Lem," I explains, "the sheriff is sitting inside that kitchen. You'll never get away. He'll hang you for cold-blooded murder. Wait till some other time."

The gun snout shakes a little, and drops lower. Old Lem stares at me like maybe he thinks I'm lying to him.

"The sheriff!" he mutters, mostly to himself. "Is Henry Nail really inside that doghouse?"

Well, before either one of us can say one word more, the sheriff himself pokes his own head out the door.

"Howdy, Lem!" he calls. "Dinner's about ready! Won't you come in and have a clean bite with us?"

Old Lem Tucker shakes his head. "No," he growls. "I guess I'll be riding along home." Then he glares down at me, and both eyes are squinted so close together that you can't hardly see the eyeballs.

"Tom," he grits, "nobody but a yellow tattler would crawl behind the sheriff for protection, in a man-to-man fracas like ours. You're a sneaky, two-faced coward, and the next time I catch you away from——"

Well, that makes me plenty sore, and I reckon my own eyes must have done a little squinting on their own account.

"Lem Tucker," I butts in, "you nor any other calf rustler is gonna talk to me like that, and if you'll just crawl down from that nag, I'll whale forty kinds of hell plumb out of your dirty carcass! Are you game?"

And that's just exactly what I tells him. Every word!

But Lem just laughs—one of them grating laughs that seems to come from a man's teeth instead of his throat.

"Fine chance!" he sneers. "You've got that sheriff posted here, just to see that you don't get hurt. No, thanks! I guess I'll be riding along. But," he adds, spitting to one side and wiping his chin on his black shirt-sleeve, "I'll catch you away from your bodyguard one of these days, and we'll see how much nerve you've got—you yellow tattler! We'll see if there's any——"

Right there, he goes too damned far!

I made a jump for his bridle reins, but I ain't quite quick enough. Lem jerks the bronc sidewise, and rides off about thirty yards. Then he turns in the saddle.

"The best way to fight fire," he calls back at me, "is to use more fire."

"What do you mean?" I growls.

But old Lem don't provide any answer. He just rides off, shrugging his shoulders and acting wise as a hound pup that's been sucking eggs on the sly.

Zack, what do you reckon Lem meant—fight fire with more fire? It's bothered me some, because that old coot does get a smart idea about once every five years, and he's about due for another one.

So that's the way things stand to date.

Your brother,

TOM.

P. S. The sheriff never seemed to guess a thing. After taking on about forty gallons of dinner, he goes on about his business. Or, maybe somebody else's business. Ha! Ha!

T. H.

P. S. (2) Can't help wondering about that "fight fire with fire" idea. Do you reckon that old coot has got something up his sleeve with the sheriff maybe?

Lawson County Jail,
Saturday morning.

ZACK:

Do you know what that slimy-blooded, fish-faced old calf-stealing whelp has gone and done? He's landed me in jail, hang his dirty, wicked heart anyhow! The sheriff says I can write you a letter, if I make it snappy.

Here he comes now.

T. H.

Sunday afternoon,
Still in jail.

DEAR ZACK:

Excuse this letter for asking, but have you ever been in jail very much yourself—especially for something you didn't do in the first place? Well, it's awful.

I've tramped up and down this adobe corral like a locoed bear, until it seems like old Lem Tucker is grinning at me from every spiderweb on the wall—and that's plenty. But that ain't all!

This afternoon being Sunday, some ladies from the city up north came in here and sang some songs, and one of them starts to pray a little, but she don't get very far.

About the time she turns loose the words, "this pore sinner," I turns loose some words on my own account. After that, they hurry away immediately, and most of them was holding their hands in their ears, like maybe they was digging for ticks. Ha! Ha!

Zack, if I ever do get out of this law corral, I'm not going to stop at plain murder of old Lem Tucker. That would be letting him off too light.

I'm going to kick the seat of his pants clear up into his shoulders, and then laugh at him for becoming humpbacked. And that ain't all I'm going to do, either. Not by a long sight! I was just thinking this afternoon how——

But that can wait.

As one brother to another, maybe you'd rather have me tell you how this all came about? So, for the time being, I'll try and make myself forget how much I'd like to run a red-hot poker down old Lem's goozle. And I'll try to explain that your brother ain't really a calf thief.

That's the charge, Zack. Old Lem has had me locked up for calf stealing. I think they called it, "the willful and malicious detention from its rightful owner, of one white-faced heifer calf, same being marked with a diamond spot on its left jaw."

And, Zack, I don't want you to think I'm worrying none, but what can they do with a man that's found guilty of such a batch of grammar?

I hope it ain't "life," because I want to be spry enough when I finally get loose to lick the tar out of—— But there I go again! Too bad, too. The only reason I sorta hate to feel this way about Lem Tucker is on account of his old maid sister that lives there with them in——

Excuse this letter, Zach, but there

ain't any eraser on this pencil, and I want that last sentence wiped out. I mean the one about Miss Cora Tucker being an old maid. Of course, she's never been married yet, but she's a heap prettier than lots of these young fillies that——

Zack, I started to tell you about this calf-stealing business, and I swear I won't get sidetracked this time, because that's a sign of brain softening, and I never expect to get like Slim Daley's kid went. Too bad, wasn't it? About the kid, I mean. The kid was always sorta bright, when he was a little shaver, and now——

Hell! There I go again.

Zack, the sheriff has just poked his head inside the door and growled something about me taking all day, so I better hurry up and finish. Don't see what it matters to him, but he keeps acting nervous, like a tinhorn gambler in church.

Anyhow, if I'm still cooped up in the morning, I'll write you and tell all about the whole thing. But until then, I'm just repeating that I'm an innocent man, and that the real calf thief is old Lem Tucker, the fish-faced old horse's neck!

Hoping you are the same,

Your brother,

Tom.

P. S. Zack, I've got a hunch that Henry Nail—he's the sheriff—has got a crush on Miss Cora, but don't say a word to any of your women folks. It might get back to Henry some way, and he'll nail my hide to the wall sure. But I'm holding my chin up and all that stuff, but it sure looks like they've got me hog-tied and hobbled already. I don't know who they got picked for the jury, but I don't reckon it's going to make a heap of difference, one way or the other.

Lem Tucker—the sneaking old fox—has got things fixed so bad against me, that I'm almost thinking that maybe I am a calf thief, after all. Not really, you know—but just doubting a little bit.

It's a mixed-up affair, Zack. And I'm going to hand you the whole set of facts, so maybe you can tell which one of us is still a gentlemen, and which one is nothing but a low-down calf thief.

Here's exactly how it happened:

Do you remember where our canyon forks with the one that runs past the Tucker place? Well, there used to be quite a bog hole where the two streams meet, and there still is.

Tuesday, it was a month ago, I happened past there about sundown and heard a powerful lot of bawling from a young calf. Being naturally curious, like dad and the rest of you boys used to say about me considerable, I rode to the edge of the bog hole and proceeded to investigate.

And, Zack, that's what caused all the trouble. If I'd rode on home and paid no attention, I'd be a free man to-day, instead of being the worst enemy Miss Cora's brother has got, and being locked up here, I can't even tell her how it came about.

Anyhow, when I reached the edge of that bog hole, there's one of my TH Bar cows, mired down to her stomach in mud. On the bank is her calf—a slick little heifer, with a funny diamond-shaped spot on its left jaw.

Well, it was quite a job getting the old mammy out, and I had to work like a long-shanked steer in fly time before I finally made it. The lasso settled around her horns on my first throw, like you'd expect. But she was sure stuck in that mud, and it was all my horse could do to drag her to solid ground, where she staggers to her feet. She acts plenty weak, but I figured she'd pull through, and the calf don't waste a minute at gathering around the festive board, as the preacher used to say.

And, Zack, right here is where the real trouble begun, only I can't write

any more just now as the sheriff is waddling down the hall toward me.

(One hour later)

Zack, I guess I've gone plumb crazy, but I just told that sheriff something that may cause my britches to get ripped, but I don't care if it does. I told him enough that he busted out of this joint, like cow-punchers stampede from a camp fire when somebody has thrown a handful of loaded shells into the coals.

He'd come in here, you see, offering to drop all charges and see that I was let loose from jail. That's what he offered.

But here's what he asked: That I sell out my stuff, muy pronto, and quit the country for good. Said it was for the best interests of all concerned, and that sort of rot.

Zack, do you know what that scheming old walrus has got up his sleeve? I do!

It's Miss Cora Tucker!

He's got the far-fetched idea that she would make a good Mrs. Sheriff, or words to that effect—and she would, too—only he'll never get her as long as I'm around, and I think he's begun to know it.

That's where the rub comes, Zack. While I'm cooped up here, helpless as a hog with a wheelbarrow, this two-bit officer is really giving Miss Cora a rush, and there's nothing I can do but grind my teeth together and cuss the day that ever allowed that little diamond-spotted heifer to make trouble between me and old Lem.

Which reminds me that I ain't told you about how the ruckus really come to a head.

Well, last Wednesday morning, I'd saddled up "Tumbleweed" and was riding over to Miss Cora's. Down where the canyon makes that fork I was telling you about, I noticed an awful smell, and pretty soon find that mammy cow where she's died from being in the bog too long. But the calf ain't nowhere's about.

Three hundred yards, maybe a quarter, inside old Lem's pasture gate, what do you reckon I found?

Correct the first time—if you guessed it—was that little heifer with the diamond spot on its left jaw! That's what it was.

But the heifer's wearing something else. It's got a Quarter Circle H, freshly burned on its right shoulder, and any cowman knows that Lem Tucker is the only man which runs that brand.

Well, at first I just sat there and grinned. I just figured, you see, that old Lem had made a mistake. Pretty soon here comes Lem himself, loping toward me on a big, raw-boned gray. I cocks one knee up over my saddle horn, and waits. I'm just rolling myself a smoke, when he jerks to a stop on the other side of the little diamond-spotted calf.

"Howdy, neighbor!" he calls.

"Howdy, you old rustler!" I responds, winking one eye to show him that I ain't all serious. "You must be hard up for calves!"

Lem takes a quick look at little diamond-spotted calf before he tackles an answer. Then he laughs, sorta uneasy.

"If you're trying to claim this calf of mine," he says, shifting sidewise in his saddle, "you've got another think coming. This calf belongs to me—always did belong to me—and always will belong to me."

"Wrong!" I corrects him. "It's a little dogie of mine that lost its mammy in the bog hole back there. You've made a mistake, Lem. I'd know this calf anywhere. Of course, since the job is already done, you can keep the little devil because he ain't really worth much, and——"

With that, old Lem puffs up like a bean-fed toad. He shakes a finger at me, and his face is about the color of day-old liver.

"Listen, you rattle-brained yahoot!" he growls. "I'm not taking a damn thing as a gift! That calf belongs to me. And if there's any giving done around here, I'm the jasper that will do it! That calf's mine!"

"Wrong!" I insists, beginning to get a little sore myself. "The crittur's mammy died back there in——"

"The calf's mother," old Lem interrupted, "is an old cow of mine that we call, 'Brindle Face'! Cora has been keeping her shut up in the corrals to feed for the past couple of weeks, and this same, exact, identical calf has been with her every minute of the time until this morning. Then I turned them both out to rustle for themselves. And if you try to claim that I'd lie about——"

But there ain't any use writing you all that stuff, Zack. You know old Lem Tucker—hard-headed as the Great Stone Face we used to read about in the school books.

And the only thing that stops a fight, then and there, is that bronc horse of his which proceeds to take old Lem from the field of battle with both Lem's hands wrapped around the saddle horn. And the last I see of him, the horse is still pitching.

Well, the first thing I do, is to throw a loop around the little dogie calf and start for home. I've done wrote you the rest, and here I am.

The trial is set for nine in the morning. And, Zack, things sure look bad. If I don't write you, some time to-morrow, address my next letters to.

Mr. Tom Halstead.
C/O The Warden,
State Penitentiary.

P. S. Zack, when you come over to straighten out my estate for me, try to get word to Miss Cora Tucker that I am damned sorry about—better not say, 'damned,' Zack. Tell her something else that means the same thing, only different.

Monday noon,
Chaves County jail.

Dear Zack:

Things look awful bad.

We had the trial this morning, and the jury has gone out to eat a bite before bringing back the verdict. I couldn't eat a smear myself.

There's a plate full of beans and some corn bread setting on the floor close to my bed, but I feel like a grain-foundered horse, and nothing looks good any more. Least of all, my chances.

Seems like I don't even dare shut my eyes, because those penitentiary doors keep popping up in front of me, and I guess it won't be very long until they do, either.

Zack, things went just exactly like I expected, only a lot worse. Of course, I kept my chin up in the air like a proud, cutting horse, but my old heart was really heavier than honeymoon biscuits just the same.

While I'm waiting for the clock to strike, "one," I'll try and tell you what happened. Because, afterward, I may not have any more chances, as they say that my warden is going to be an awful strict man up at the pen.

Zack, I'm sure glad that you wasn't on the jury this morning. I must have looked awful bad to those fellows, and my story of the affair sure sounded plenty weak. I'll admit that myself.

You see, old Lem Tucker is the first one to take the witness chair. He tells his side of the yarn, and then the judge calls for me to begin the defense, or something of that kind.

Anyhow, I give it to them—right from the shoulder—just exactly as things had really happened and every word was the gospel truth.

Well, so far, we were about even, and I could see that the jury was plumb puzzled, not knowing which one to believe, and which one to think is the damned liar.

Then old Lem Tucker reaches up his

sleeve and pulls out an ace-in-the-hole.

And it's a dandy, too. It sure ripped my britches, Zack—spoiled my yarn entirely, and made me look like some overgrown kid that's been caught in the pantry.

I'll tell you about it.

With everything about even so far, old Lem Tucker straightens to his feet, mysterious as an old she cat with a batch of fresh kittens hidden out somewheres, and strides over to the judge's table.

"Your honor," Lem says, "I'd just like to ask you and the jury to step outside for a few minutes. The boys and myself have prepared a surprise."

"Never mind the surprise," growls the judge. "Proceed with the trial!" He points at the chair which Lem has just emptied.

But old Lem don't make a move. Instead, he shakes his head, grinning some.

"Your honor," he continues, "this is some more of the evidence. It's some proof that old 'hide-behind-the-sheriff' Halstead, otherwise known as the defendant here, won't even try to deny. Will your honor give us the chance?"

Well, the judge and old Lem stare one another in the eye for a spell, like a couple of jealous bucks getting ready to smash their heads together, and then the judge weakens. He's got a curiosity streak of his own, you see.

We all go outside, the sheriff hanging on to my arm like I was a damned thief or something.

Along the west side of the courthouse is a big cottonwood tree, and old Lem plants us there while he steps out in front of the whole crowd.

He pokes a couple of fingers in his mouth, and whistles—real loud.

You oughta seen what happened, Zack. He had it all framed up perfectly.

Quick as old Lem whistled, he has a cowboy at the north end of Main Street turn loose a cow, and one at the south end turn loose a calf which they've been holding with ropes.

Well, the two critturs stand there and bawl for a minute, the first thing, and then they start together at a high trot. The cow and calf meet about halfway in the block, right in front of Garner's Mercantile store with the glass windows.

Zack, that cow was an old brindle-faced crittur with Lem Tucker's Quarter Circle H on her right shoulder. And the calf, was the same, exact, identical, little diamond-spotted one that I've been writing you about so often!

And what kind of a damned show do you reckon they put on, right in front of the jury and everybody?

Well, it ain't necessary for two old cowmen like me and you to go into particulars, but if I say that, "lunch was served on the grounds," maybe you'll get what I mean.

So you can guess what sort of a hit that made with the jury. It don't do me a bit of good, afterward, to explain that some mothers and some calves aren't always particular about that nursing business, because one look at that jury's face is plenty to show that they're already counting me the calf thief, and old Lem Tucker as the man who has been sinned against.

And now I am setting here, waiting for the time when that sheriff is soon going to lead me back to the courtroom to hear the jury's verdict that I am a low-down calf thief.

Zack, I wouldn't mind so much, if it wasn't on account of Miss Cora Tucker. She's been out of town for quite a spell, but old Lem said that she would be on hand this afternoon in case the judge wanted any more witnesses. The judge agrees that it might be a good idea, but I set my foot down on the whole thing.

I told him nothing doing, even if I have to go to the pen for life, because it ain't any place for a lady in a courthouse. Especially, a lady like Miss Cora.

It's awful tough, Zack—her being in danger of getting married to Sheriff Henry Nail after I'm gone, but I reckon there's worse men.

Your brother,

TOM.

P. S. It's all over, Zack. The sheriff just stopped me before I got done writing, so I could hear what the jury had decided. They said I was guilty, Zack. I can't——

Zack, I can't seem to write any more. Good-bye—Tom.

Monday night,
AT HOME AGAIN!

DEAR ZACK:

I'm so tickled I can hardly see what is being wrote, but I've got to tell you about it, right away and quick!

Zack, do you reckon I am asleep and just dreaming all this stuff? I'll put it down on paper and see if it looks as good as it feels to be out of jail.

That's exactly where I am at—out of jail!

In case you don't believe how it happened, I will try and tell you.

This afternoon, Miss Cora Tucker gets back from her trip and somebody tells her about me being a calf thief on account of that little diamond-spotted dogie. Well, that's the beginning.

In less time than the words can drop off my pencil, she has busted into the judge's office and told him a thing or two mighty quick, and is demanding that I be turned loose as a respectable, law-abiding citizen—which, of course, I really am.

Anyhow, she explains all about the calf stealing.

It seems that she was driving along in one of old Lem's buckboard wagons several weeks ago and found this little dogie calf about dead on account of losing its mammy in the bog hole.

Being a woman, Miss Cora can't stand the sight, so she carries the calf home with her and tries to make old Brindle Face give it some supper. But old Brindle Face, at that time, has got a young daughter of her own, and don't crave the idea of going into the restaurant business.

Well, old Lem ain't there to help any, so Miss Cora does some thinking of her own. She finally ties the little diamond-spotted dogie close to the other calf, and leaves them in the pen with the old mammy. The scheme works.

Old Brindle Face can't fight the dogie off, without starving her own calf, so she finally gives in and becomes generous. Two days later, her own calf dies, and after that the little diamond-spotted calf has a lunch room all to herself.

But before Miss Cora gets a chance to explain to old Lem, she is called over into Eddy County on a hurry case to help a sick woman. That's where old Lem steps in. He brands the calf and turns it loose.

Well, Zack. I have bought me a new suit of clothes, and if everything turns out to be a pretty day to-morrow, Miss Cora has promised that we can take a ride together.

So I can hardly wait.

Your brother,

TOM.

Bear Spring Canyon,
Saturday night.

DEAR ZACK:

I have just been talking to Mr. Lemuel Tucker, and he says that it would be nice if you could come over to the wedding that he is giving Thursday morning in honor of me and Miss Cora who expect to get spliced at that time. We both hope you can come, as a good time is expected by all.

Your loving brother,

TOM.

P. S. There will be plenty to eat for everybody, as Lem and me are going to butcher our little diamond-spotted calf on account of the big barbecue dinner afterward. Be sure and come. T. H.

A

Novelette

STOLEN WATERS

CHAPTER I.

A BRANDED MAN.

TROUBLE clouded "Tex" Corbett's gray eyes as he identified the two riders approaching him. His powerful frame shifted slightly in the saddle, but he kept the roan on the trail, moved ahead steadily.

It was inevitable that he would encounter "Apache" Pinard sooner or later. But it was just his tough luck that when it did occur it caught him without his .45.

Dust lifted in the dry, hot air. The two horsemen rode up swiftly, then spun their mounts sidewise until they blocked the trail. Tex Corbett stopped the roan, hand steady on the reins.

"Señor Corbett, I believe. What an unexpected pleasure." Thin lips drew back from shining, white teeth as Apache Pinard bowed with mock courtesy. His black eyes flashed evilly in a face tanned to a mahogany hue.

"I heard you'd been turned loose, Apache," Corbett said steadily. "I've been expectin' a call."

By Harold A. Davis

The course of true love may never run smooth—but a ranny discovered a watercourse to be just as erratic!

"I knew you would, Señor."

"Go ahead an' salivate him and get it over with," growled his companion. A .45 snapped into his hand. "If you don't, I will."

Apache turned a reproving stare on the other. "But no, Suds, pleasantries always must be exchanged, even when a killin' is contemplated."

Tex Corbett's hand were moist as perspiration broke out suddenly. Death was in the air. Apache Pinard's soft words covered a burning hate. And "Suds" Leggard, small and insignificant as he appeared, had a reputation as a swift and deadly gunman.

"I'm not heeled, Apache," Corbett said quietly.

The other's grin widened. "So I observed. That makes my task easier. An' you're goin' to die. If——"

"If what?" the big waddie snapped. The roan shifted nervously. Almost unnoticed it drew closer to Apache.

"If you'd shown judgment two years ago this wouldn't have come up," Pinard said swiftly. The smile had gone from his face, his eyes narrowed. "Two years ago when I offered to buy your ranch, you refused——"

"An' then you took a shot at me," Corbett broke in dryly. "You tried to bushwhack me first, then tried to rustle my cattle."

"Now the country isn't big enough for both o' us," Apache went on smoothly. "You won't run, I know, so——"

"So you're goin' to kill me, huh? My answer now is the same as it was two years ago: Go to hell!"

Rage darkened the other's face. One hand darted to the black butt of his six-gun.

Corbett jabbed spurs into the roan. It leaped ahead, crashed into Apache's piebald, half threw its rider.

Suds Leggard's gun came up, spat lead. But Corbett had moved too quickly. The bullet sang harmlessly by his head. Then one big arm shot out, yanked Apache Pinard from his saddle, held him helpless, feet kicking in the air. Corbett's right fist yanked the six-gun from the other's hand, held it at his hip.

"Drop that gun, Suds!"

For a moment the small man hesitated, then obeyed. Apache's body shielded Corbett; Suds knew he had no chance.

Corbett dropped Apache, swung from the saddle after him. He threw shells from Suds's gun, tossed it to him.

"Now get," he said savagely. "I'll leave your gun in town for you later, Apache. But the next time I run into you two, you won't get off so easy!"

"The next time I'll shoot first and talk afterwards," Apache snarled. He swung astride the piebald, applied spurs viciously. Suds Leggard opened his mouth as if to speak, then snapped his lips together and followed.

CORBETT mounted and turned in his saddle, watching the two ride away. Slowly the tension went out of his big frame, but a frown came to his broad, flat face.

He'd been close to death, too close for comfort. From now on he'd watch his step. Only because the two outlaws had been caught napping, thinking him powerless, had he saved himself this time.

Apache Pinard was a strange combination. He really had little Indian blood in him. His father had been Spanish, and a real gentleman. But the small strain of Indian had not mixed well with hot Latin blood. Apache was a renegade.

Suds Leggard was merely border trash—but he was dangerous. No one disputed that.

"An' they wanted my ranch once, I wonder why?" Corbett mused.

He understood why the two hated him—that had been an outgrowth of Apache's unsuccessful effort to buy his land. When Corbett had refused to sell they had started out to make life difficult for him.

He'd been fired at from ambush; fences had been cut. Then they had attempted to rustle part of his herd—and there they had slipped. Corbett had caught them, and they'd been sent to prison.

They should still be in prison, he thought. But they weren't. With time off for good behavior they were out, bent on revenge.

He chuckled grimly, spoke to the roan and started on down the trail. Did they still want his ranch, he wondered? There was no reason why any one should. He certainly hadn't made a fortune with it. Quite the contrary in fact.

Only with luck would he get out of debt this season after two bad years. The grass was coming up good now, and the calf crop had been large. If he could only hold on, he might make it.

But even that was going to be difficult. To-day he'd managed to pay the bank some of the interest he owed. Not much, but enough so his note

wouldn't be pressed. Of course, that hadn't left him much cash for tobacco or coffee, but he could stand that until roundup time, if it would save his ranch.

Certainly his layout was nothing to make Apache and Suds want to kill him in order to get it. And other spreads were on the market, if land was all the two wanted.

Corbett skirted a small clump of trees, neared his ranch. The burning sun was dropping. His cabin, nestled under tall cottonwoods, looked inviting. Once a river had run behind where the cabin now stood. That had been years before—before a cloudburst had changed its course. The river was gone, but the big trees remained.

It was a lonely spot for a man by himself. But perhaps he wouldn't always be alone. Maybe Dorothy Harkness would share his home with him some day, if the roundup was good.

LIFTING the saddle from the roan, then tossing out some feed, Corbett got his rifle and started down the old river bed. A cottontail would go good for supper, and it would help conserve the small supply of canned food he still had. At his hip he carried Apache's .45. From now on he'd go heeled. The next time he met Apache, lead would fly.

Weird shadows filtered through the trees, danced on the sand. Trees creaked as a faint breeze stirred them with the coming of dusk. The old river bed was not a cheerful place; it was gloomy and forbidding.

At twilight, under the queer spell of the trees, you could almost believe the rumors old-timers told about, Corbett thought. For it was in this vicinity that a wagon train was supposed to have vanished, sometime in the late 60's, vanished without a trace of wagon, horse, or the fifty or more skilled plainsmen who had been with the train.

Indians had been blamed, but there had been no proof. When searchers had set out to learn the fate of the wagon train and men, they had found nothing. Wheel marks had been washed away by the same cloudburst that had changed the course of the river.

A small rabbit hopped into view, then started to race away. Corbett's rifle cracked.

And as if that had been a signal, the earth shook. A terrific blast of noise tore through the trees, deafened the eardrums.

Tex Corbett jumped, a puzzled expression on his flat face. The explosion had seemed to come from the south, over toward the Harkness ranch.

He ran forward, picking his way through the underbrush that rose from the old river bed. Then he halted, and his eyes widened. There was another sound now, a faint, whispering sound that seemed to be coming nearer.

The bushes ahead of him were shaking queerly. A moulten, grayish pencil moved along the sand. The whispering grew to a dull, angry roar. Bushes crumpled.

Corbett turned, raced toward the closest shore, just as a wall of water swept toward him. He reached the bank barely in time. Behind him the wave of water roared on, filling a channel that had been dry for many decades.

For a moment the waddie's mouth hung open, and he stared at the running water with blank wonder on his flat face. Then his lips clamped together.

That explosion could have meant only one thing. Some one had used dynamite to change the course of the river. It no longer ran through the Harkness's ranch. It ran through his.

He dropped the rifle, loped forward with the awkward stride of a cowboy afoot. He was near the edge of his holdings, and the river had forked just beyond.

The trees thinned; running became easier. Ahead of him he could see a cloud of dust, dust evidently raised by the blast that had changed the course of the river again.

Lungs straining for air, he slowed to a walk, pulled the .45 from its holster, examined it. There was no telling what he might run into when he reached the scene of the explosion.

Cautiously he circled, slipped back into the trees and underbrush, and wormed his way ahead. He held the six-gun in his hand, eyes hard.

A STARTLED exclamation came from between tight lips. He could see the river again now, could see where the blast had occurred.

No wonder the ground had shaken. Many sticks of dynamite must have been used. An entire section of a sandstone cliff had been ripped loose to drop across the stream, completely damming its flow, and forcing it to return to its old bed.

Those rocks had held the water back for a few moments, until the river could climb over the dirt and brush to leap forward in a swing that had sent it thundering across Corbett's land.

A river had been stolen, had been given to him. But why, and by whom? He shook his head. There was no logical reason. Of course, he was glad to have the water, and it increased the value of his ranch. But he didn't want it this way.

"Old Man" Harkness would be angry. Short-tempered and crusty, Harkness had never been a very agreeable neighbor. But Corbett had always managed to get along with him—for always he'd thought of the black-haired Dorothy—Harkness's daughter.

His eyes searched the scene carefully. No one could be seen. But that was logical. Whoever had set off the dynamite would have known the blast would be heard for miles, had probably made a fast get-away.

Abandoning caution, the big waddie moved on boldly, walking to the edge of the stream. Then his breath quickened; his flat face went blank of emotion. A riderless horse had appeared from around one end of the newly made rock dam. It was a Harkness animal.

Fear suddenly gripped the big waddie, not fear for himself, but another kind of fear, a fear that left him weak and shaken.

He dashed forward, circled the dam, only to halt. A hand was thrown out from under those rocks, a burly hand that was clenched tightly in the grip of death.

Corbett's breath came out. That was a man's hand. It was bad, but not what he'd feared. Grimly he stooped, lifted the rocks from the crushed form of the waddie who'd been caught beneath the avalache of stone.

With difficulty he identified that mangled figure. The rannie was one of Harkness's riders. He certainly hadn't been the one who had set off the explosion. Probably he'd been riding by just as the blast went off, had been trapped before he could move.

Or—and the big waddie's face grew grim at the thought—perhaps the rannie had caught the dynamiters at work, and been slain and left so the rocks would fall on his body. The figure was so mangled that it was impossible to tell whether there was a bullet wound in it or not.

Corbett rose to his feet, wiped sweat from his brow. It was growing dark rapidly, and this certainly was no place to stay. Others must have heard the explosion, probably were on their way.

Harkness might believe he had set off the blast to get more water for his land. It would be just as well to postpone explanations, rather than to meet the other in the first flush of rage. Not

that he feared Harkness, but he wanted this settled peaceably.

Slowly he turned, started toward his own land.

Blam!

Crimson streaked the dusk. Lead whined by his ear.

Corbett whirled, .45 in his hand. The hammer came back—but did not fall.

Facing him, not a dozen yards away, was a girl, a girl whose face was flushed with anger. In her hand a .38 was held steady.

"You—you river thief and killer!" she cried.

CHAPTER II.

AMBUSHER!

TEX CORBETT'S gun dropped in its holster. He moved as if to step forward.

"Stand still! Put your hands up!" There was no mistaking the loathing in the girl's voice. She was small. Dark hair tumbled about her face, a face now cold and stern, despite the curve of full lips.

The big waddie halted. Slowly his hands went up, while pain darkened his eyes. "But, Dorothy," he said gently, "I didn't do this. You know I couldn't."

"I know you must have done it," the girl snapped. "I wouldn't have believed it, if I hadn't caught you here myself, hadn't seen you try to sneak away." She glanced at the crushed body, and her voice broke slightly.

"Oh, Tex. Why did you dynamite the cliff? Why did you kill?"

"I didn't," Corbett said firmly. He started toward her with steady steps. "You know I could do nothin' to make your father angry, Dorothy."

The girl hesitated, then the .38 snapped up again. Her eyes flashed. "You are smooth, Tex. Dad always said you were. But stop where you are. I don't want to hurt you, but if you take one more step, I'll shoot to kill!"

The waddie moved steadily ahead. The girl gave a small cry, spun her pony. "I can't—I can't shoot you, Tex. Run, get away! Get away before dad finds this! For he'll kill you!"

The pony raced through the trees out of sight. For a long moment Corbett stood motionless, then he turned, walked slowly toward his cabin, big shoulders drooping.

When Dorothy cooled down, he'd try to convince her he really hadn't stolen the river, hadn't killed the waddie whose crushed body was lying beside the newly formed dam. No, he hadn't killed. But somebody had!

Could it have been Apache Pinard? Possibly. Corbett nodded his head. Apache and Suds could have circled after they had met him, could have reached the river easily.

He frowned. No, that didn't sound quite reasonable. The two could have reached the river, right enough, but it would have taken some time to plant the charge of dynamite, unless it had been done in advance.

And besides, what possible reason could they have for wanting to change the course of the river? It might cause Harkness to turn on Corbett, but how could the two outlaws hope to benefit from that?

He shook his head, thought again of the riderless horse that had been at the dam and shuddered. Dorothy often had ridden that mount. It had been because he'd though something had happened to her that fear had gripped him.

Suppose it had been Dorothy who'd been killed? His flat face set in grim lines. If Apache Pinard and Suds Leggard were responsible for that explosion, he'd make them pay for the momentary panic he'd experienced. And he'd ride into town to-morrow, find Apache and drag the truth out of him. A show-down was coming, and it might as well come at once. Apache

had been right. The country wasn't big enough for both of them.

His eyes caught a faint glimpse of metal. He stooped, picked up his rifle. It was too dark to hunt now. He'd have to go without supper. But that was nothing new, and he could stand it.

Still immersed in thought, he reached his cabin, entered and lighted a lamp. He sat down, only to jump to his feet restlessly, walk to the door and stand staring into the night.

From somewhere close at hand came a faint sound, such as might be made by a boot on a twig. Roused from his abstraction, the big waddie didn't stop to think—there was no time to think—he dropped to the floor.

There was a crack, like a banjo string breaking. Hot lead smashed the chimney of the lamp, left the cabin in darkness.

ONLY Corbett's instinctive move had saved his life. Outlined plainly in the doorway, he'd offered an excellent target.

The rifle cracked again. A bullet smacked in the doorway where he'd been lying. But the waddie was no longer there. He had rolled to one side.

He leaped to his feet, stepped quickly to a window. His .45 spoke, raking the brush from which the bushwhacker's shots had come. But the other must also have moved. There were no yells, nothing to indicate he'd made a hit.

Despite his bulk, the big waddie moved fast. He crammed extra cartridges into his pocket, raised a window noiselessly, then stepped into the night. A swift dash carried him to the cover of the trees.

Behind Corbett the rifle sounded. He heard lead smash into pine boards as it tore through the cabin, and grinned slightly as he circled, moved to come up on the bushwhacker from the rear.

Eyes trying to pierce the darkness, all his attention on the job of trapping his enemy, he forgot the log that lay in his path. He stumbled, went down with a crash.

A bullet snapped toward him, then came the sound of running feet. A moment later a horse could be heard racing away.

Disgustedly Corbett cussed himself. The bushwhacker, whoever he was, had been frightened off, hadn't cared to stay and trade shots when he no longer had the advantage.

Corbett thought for a moment, then reutrned to the cabin and picked up a blanket. It probably would be best to sleep in the open, where he couldn't be trapped. His enemy might return, catch him asleep. There was no use taking the chance of being murdered in bed.

Slowly he walked toward the river bed. He knew every bush, every path and trail—and knew where he could bed down with little chance of being found.

The running water sounded ghostly in the darkness. Maybe it was ghostly, maybe the spirits of those long dead plainsmen still haunted the place where death had met them.

The big waddie grinned. For a long time he lay awake, unable to sleep, his mind working with the problem that confronted him. Somehow he had to find the real dynamiter and killer, had to prove he'd had nothing to do with stealing the river.

Once he thought he heard a distant shot, the sound of horses, and lifted his head. But he heard nothing more, then fell into a troubled slumber.

IT was just dawn when he awoke, awoke with a sense of some peril hanging over him. His hand jumped to the butt of his .45, then fell away as he recalled the events of the evening before.

He was in peril, but not the kind he could fight with lead, at least right now.

He was in peril of losing the girl he cared for because of a murder he hadn't committed.

Rising stiffly, he shook himself, rolled his blanket and moved toward the cabin. At least he'd been able to get some sleep without fear of being killed while defenseless.

He thought longingly of a hot cup of coffee, then tightened his belt. There was no coffee in the cabin, or money to buy any. But he'd eat some hot cakes, then saddle his roan and go to town.

Apache Pinard was going to do some talking, whether he wanted to or not. Corbett's flat face was hard; his big paws clenched. He hoped Apache wouldn't be able to explain.

The soft beat of horses' hoofs came from the other side of the cabin. The big waddie dodged back, dropped his blanket, then stepped out and walked forward to meet the two who rode toward him.

"Howdy, Dorothy. Hello, sheriff," he said quietly.

The girl said nothing.

"Mornin', Tex," the sheriff said briefly. He looked at Corbett with shrewd eyes. "Understand somebody gave your river back."

The big waddie nodded.

"Gave it back, nothing. He stole it," the girl said swiftly.

A slow smile crossed the sheriff's lined face. A veteran peace officer, he'd known Corbett for years. "Maybe so, Dorothy," he said calmly, "but we'll hear Tex's side. Stealin' a river don't sound much like him. He had water enough for his cattle, an' good grazin' for 'em. An' I don't think he'd kill a man." He paused, then spoke abruptly:

"But what happened to Harkness, Tex?"

The big waddie looked surprised.

"What happened to him? What do you mean?"

"Dorothy tells me he rode over to see you last night, an' didn't come back."

Corbett shook his head. "I didn't see him. Somebody took a pot-shot at me in my cabin last night, so I slept down by the river. So if he did call, he didn't catch me at home."

"You would run," snapped the girl.

The big waddie's head came up. "Now, Dorothy," interposed the sheriff. "Tex here ain't the runnin' kind, as we both know. Your dad probably found Tex wasn't in his cabin an' has been lookin' for him. Likely he's home now."

Corbett nodded. "That must be it," he said. But he was filled with sudden foreboding. He was remembering that distant shot he'd heard in the night, and the sound of trotting horses.

NOW about this river you're alleged to have stolen, Tex," the sheriff was going on. "I don't think you did it. An' I don't think you killed that waddie. Why don't you invite us in for coffee, an' we'll discuss it. Maybe we can figure out who did do it."

It seemed to Corbett that hope flashed for a moment in Dorothy's eyes, as if she wanted him to be able to explain satisfactorily.

He opened his mouth, then clamped it shut tightly. He'd almost forgotten that he had no coffee, that he couldn't invite these two in to learn just how hard up he was.

"Sorry, sheriff," he said gruffly. "I don't think Miss Harkness would care to have coffee with me."

"Yes, I would, Tex," she said softly. "I'll listen to you explain. I was excited last night. Perhaps I was wrong."

The sheriff swung from his horse; a big smile on his face.

Corbett didn't move. "I'm sorry, sheriff, I can't invite you in," he said bluntly.

The sheriff's smile vanished; his features hardened. "No? Why not, Corbett?"

"I—I'm goin' into town, right now. I've business there."

"None that can't wait," snapped the sheriff, and friendliness had vanished from his voice. He started forward.

The big waddie moved, as if to bar his way.

The sheriff's gun snapped out. "Something funny about this, Corbett. I think I'll just take a look in your cabin, whether you want me to or not."

"It's just—it's just——" the big waddie started. Then stopped.

The sheriff had thrown open the cabin door, had uttered a low yell of shocked surprise. The girl swung from her horse, raced forward, Corbett at her side.

Just as they reached the door the sheriff spun, jabbed his six-gun into the big waddie's stomach.

"So you lied, Corbett. Harkness did find you home! An' he's here yet—here dead, with a bullet in his back!"

CHAPTER III.

THE "ESCAPE" OF TEX CORBETT.

THE cool, fresh smell of sage filled the air. Somewhere near at hand a bird was singing. The sound of water could be heard as it rustled through the bushes that lined the old river bed.

But Corbett was aware of none of this. He could see only the stricken face of Dorothy Harkness, could hear only her sobs as she darted into the cabin, dropped beside the body of her father.

The touch of cold steel on his wrists aroused him. The sheriff had slipped on the handcuffs deftly. Now the big waddie was completely helpless, but his brain started to work again.

"I didn't know he was here, sheriff," he said quietly. "I heard a distant shot sometime durin' the night, then sounds o' horses. Whoever shot at me run into Harkness, killed him, then brought him here so I'd get the blame."

"So you knew he hadn't been killed in your cabin, did you?" the sheriff barked bitingly. "You knew there was no blood on the floor, that he was brought here after he'd been bushwhacked—from behind. Probably thought you'd get a chance to hide the body out later. No wonder you didn't want us to enter your cabin. An' you dynamited the river an' killed that other poor waddie!"

Corbett started to speak, then clamped his mouth shut tightly. No matter what he said, it would only make things look worse for him.

"I wouldn't 'a' thought it o' you, Corbett," the sheriff went on bitterly. He shrugged. "I don't know whether I'll be able to keep you for a court trial or not."

The big waddie's mouth tightened. He didn't know either. Shooting an hombre from behind generally brought a hanging, a swift hanging, and not a legal one either.

The girl rose from the floor, turned to the sheriff. Her grief was under control now; her face was white and drawn, but her voice was steady.

"When you take this—this snake to jail, sheriff, will you please send out whoever you think best to take care of dad's body?"

The sheriff nodded.

Corbett was silent as the sheriff saddled the roan, ordered him to mount. And he spoke no word on the long trip to town. But his thoughts were busy, busy with what seemed an impossible task.

An attempt had been made to kill him. Two others had been slain and a river stolen. It must all link up somehow, but how? Apache hated him, wanted to kill him, but why would he want to change the course of the river? And why had Harkness been killed?

While it might have been reasonable

to suppose that Harkness would call on the big waddie when he learned the river no longer ran through his ranch, no bushwhacker could have known in advance that Corbett wouldn't be in his cabin so that it would be safe to take the body there.

Then Corbett's flat face lighted slightly. The explanation he'd given the sheriff probably was correct. His enemy must have returned for another attempt to kill him, found him gone, and then encountered Harkness as he left and saw an admirable chance to so involve the big waddie that he couldn't possibly escape.

And if Apache had done it, he'd covered his tracks well. Corbett could see no possible hope for himself. But that still didn't explain the dynamiting of the river, and that must have been done for some definite object.

Rannies looked up curiously as the sheriff rode toward the jail with his prisoner. A few asked questions, but the sheriff made no reply.

"No use havin' to contend with a mob right away," he told Corbett grimly as he lodged the waddie in the small jail.

"Just one request I'd like to make, sheriff," Corbett said. "Check up on Apache Pinard, find out where he was last night."

"Oh, so you think you might throw the blame on him, do you?" the sheriff rasped scornfully. "I don't need to go huntin' an imaginary murderer when I've already got the real one!"

He slammed the cell door, turned the key.

I COULDN'T be in much worse a jam if I'd really set out to get myself hung," Corbett reflected bitterly. Flat face grim, he dropped on the small cot.

His forehead creased. Slowly, he went over everything that had happened, recalled every morsel of gossip he'd ever heard, tried to piece it together.

"So, the smart Señor Corbett is in jail, no?" drawled a sarcastic voice outside the jail window.

The big waddie swung, his face flushing with anger. "As if you hadn't done your best to get me here!" he snapped.

Apache Pinard laughed softly. "I'm sorry I'm not responsible," he jeered, "but it pleases me to have you think I am. An' I know it will please you to hear what I have heard: that good friends o' yours have decided you shouldn't be tried in court. No. So these good friends are going to tear the jail down to-night and get you out—so they may hang you to the first tree."

He turned away, still chuckling.

Corbett looked after him. Pinard was carrying a metal object in one hand, a huge piece of steel, bent into the shape of a giant fishhook. For a moment the big waddie's face was puzzled. Then his eyes lighted; he chuckled excitedly.

"I've got it! I've got it! It wouldn't sound reasonable, but that's it! Why didn't I think of it before?"

He rushed to the cell door, rattled the bars. No one answered. Mouth open to shout, he changed his mind. He'd never be able to make the sheriff believe it, and it wouldn't do any good to tell him.

For a moment he hesitated, discouraged. Then his shoulders straightened. It was up to him to get himself out of the difficulty he was in. No one else would help him, that was sure.

His eyes darted about the cell swiftly. He tried the bars in the window. They were set firmly, no chance to escape that way, and besides it was daylight. He'd have to get out, but it would have to be a trick. A grin cut his flat face. He knew the trick to try—if he got the chance.

But as the hours passed during that long, hot day, he began to doubt that he'd ever get the chance. Word of

Harkness's murder had spread. A mob, angry and sullen, moved about the jail.

The sheriff, the jailer at his side, lounged in the doorway of the small building. Both held shotguns in their arms.

But Corbett knew those shotguns would be of little use when the mob finally attacked. Two men couldn't hold off half a hundred, also armed and bent on lynching.

Worry clouded the waddie's eyes. He was taking a gamble—but he had to take it. If only his plan would work the way he wanted——

At dusk most of the mob turned to the one small restaurant in town for food. The sheriff sighed wearily, put down his gun.

"I think it's safe for me to get a bite, too," he told the jailer. "You stay here on guard. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Corbett went into action. It was now —or be hanged

Strong hands ripped the one thin blanket in the cell into long strips. Quickly he made a rope, tied one end to the bars as high as he could reach, then made a noose in the other end, placed it about his neck.

The jailer, alert and tense, heard a faint groan, then a choking, gasping noise. For a moment he paused uncertainly, then entered the jail cautiously.

With a startled cry he dropped the shotgun and grabbed his keys.

Corbett was swaying, head back, face red, the noose tight about his neck. In front of the cot his boots dangled over empty air.

"HERE, we can't have you killin' yourself that way," the jailer exclaimed weakly. He swung open the cell door, took a step inside.

The waddie's two big fists swung up, caught the unsuspecting jailer on either side of the chin. He dropped without a sound.

Without a lost motion Corbett jerked the noose from his neck, stepped to the floor. Then he untied his boots, the boots which had been dangling in front of the cot, and slipped them on his feet.

Those boots had been the final evidence he'd needed to trick the jailer. The light had been poor. The jailer hadn't seen that his feet really had been firm on the cot, protruding from holes torn in the back of his chaps.

For a moment the waddie hesitated. Then he pulled the jailer's limp form into the cell, stepped outside and locked the door. He looked at the shotgun longingly, but shook his head. If it had been a .45 he'd have taken it, but the shotgun might prove more of a hinderance than a help.

With swift strides he moved to the door. A few rannies were still on the street. Quickly he turned, moved toward the back and peered out.

The way was clear, and in the stable was his roan.

No one saw him as he slipped across the yard. No one paid any attention to the sound of a horse walking slowly out of town. It wasn't until the sheriff returned from his brief supper that the escape was discovered.

Corbett didn't hear the roar of rage that went up when it was learned he'd made his get-away. He didn't see the frantic rush for cayuses, the swift forming of posses that set out with orders to get him "dead or alive."

He didn't need to do so. He knew he would be hunted down, shot without mercy if those posses caught him. He'd gambled on that, had gambled he could prove what he believed to be a fact.

Until he could do that he'd have to stay on the dodge. And unless he found the proof he sought, he was doomed. Even if he were to get a court trial

he would be doomed. The very fact that he'd broken jail, had run for it, would be the clinching fact. Flight would be taken for confession.

The roan covered the ground swiftly, but the big waddie didn't ride in a straight line. He took to gullies and canyons. Trackers wouldn't be much use at night, but if he wasn't caught before morning, trained eyes would read his trail, would hunt him down.

He grinned slightly as he reached a long stretch of barren rock. At three different points he rode off the rock, circled and turned. The trackers would find that trail confusing.

Then he tore off his shirt, made pads for the roan's hoofs, and led it over scattered rock and hard-packed dobe.

Much later he resumed the saddle. The night was more than half gone, but he should have so hidden his trail that he couldn't be traced—and he was going to the last place he believed posses would look for him.

TWICE during the night, bands of hard-riding rannies passed close to him, but each time he escaped notice in the darkness.

Now he set off on as straight a course as he could take—direct for his small cabin beneath the trees. Not even Apache, he thought wryly, would believe him fool enough to go there. So it should be safe, at least long enough to get his rifle and some ammunition.

Besides, he had to be close to that cabin. Unless he'd figured all wrong, the vicinity of that cabin was the only place that held the clue to the stolen river and to the murder of Harkness.

Nearing the cabin he slowed, dismounted and advanced on foot. For minutes at a time he stood motionless, ears straining.

Nothing could be heard. The cabin door was closed. Evidently it had been left that way after the body of Harkness had been removed.

He slipped forward, skirting patches of moonlight, keeping to cover as much as possible In the distance the river seemed to be moaning. His lips felt parched and dry; his muscles were tense.

Then he shrugged his shoulders, darted quickly toward the door. There was no occasion to get nervous. No one was near.

The door swung open under his hand. He stepped inside—and froze. A circle of cold steel was jammed against the back of his neck!

CHAPTER IV.

A BARGAIN.

GORBETT stood helpless. He was unarmed. To move might mean death, and he didn't want to die branded as a murderer. Mentally he berated himself. He'd underestimated the sheriff's intelligence, had walked directly into a trap.

The muzzle of the gun bit deeper into his neck. "I knew murderers always returned to the scene of their crime," a voice hissed into his ear.

The big waddie started. "Dorothy?" he asked, incredulously.

"I knew as soon as the boys brought word that you'd escaped that you'd come here," the girl went on. Her voice seemed to catch. "B-but nobody'd believe me. I had to come alone."

Almost instantly she seemed to regret the admission. "I mean I had to come ahead," she added swiftly. "Others will be here in a few minutes."

"What are you goin' to do with me?" Gorbett's voice was calm, but his thoughts weren't. Whether Dorothy knew it or not, the big waddie realized she'd probably spoken the truth. Others would be along soon, if for no other reason than to see that she came to no harm.

"I—I should kill you, shoot you from behind as you did dad," she said fiercely.

"But I can't do that—I—I wish I could. Turn around, keep your hands high, and walk out into the open. And if you make any false motions, I will shoot. It wouldn't bother my conscience then!"

Slowly Corbett turned, moved as if to obey. He stepped to the ground, appeared to stumble, half go down.

The girl was close behind him. Before she could catch herself she'd crashed into him, threw up one hand to grab the doorsill to save herself from falling.

The big waddie spun, shot erect, his huge hand catching her wrist. A moment later and he'd dropped her gun into his pocket.

"I hated to do it, Dorothy," he apologized gently. "But I knew you'd never listen to reason. An' I can't be caught—at least not yet."

"You—you——" the girl was nearly sobbing with rage. "I hope they string you up to the nearest tree!"

"They probably would—if I fell into their hands now," Corbett said grimly. "But I don't intend to. Are you comin' with me peaceably, or do I have to tie an' gag you?"

The girl opened her mouth, started to scream. The big waddie's paw clamped over her lips. She struggled, scratching and fighting. Only with difficulty was he able to hold her without hurting her.

His shins hurt where he'd been kicked with sharp-toed boots; his face was scratched and bleeding before he finally managed to get her into the cabin, get rope and bind her arms. He tore the bandana from his neck for a crude gag.

Corbett's heart was pounding swiftly, and it wasn't altogether from the struggle. Even angry, it had been sweet to hold Dorothy in his arms. If only he could once clear himself, once make her understand he hadn't killed her father——

HE forced himself to think of other things. Time enough to think of Dorothy when he had cleared himself—if he ever did. And unless he moved swiftly now, he probably never would have that chance.

It wouldn't be long, probably was only a matter of minutes before waddies from the ranch came to search for Dorothy. Even the murder of her dad wouldn't seem as great a crime to them as the rough treatment of the girl they all adored.

He grabbed his rifle, made a small bundle of his meager provisions. A swift search outside the cabin, and he found where the girl had hidden her pony. He brought it to the door of the cabin, together with his roan.

"Mount!" he ordered briefly.

The girl's eyes flashed with anger she could not express. A grin split Corbett's flat face. Of course she couldn't mount with her hands tied. He lifted her, tossed her easily into the saddle.

Straight for the river he rode, leading the girl's horse behind him.

"Don't be afraid, Dorothy," he said reassuringly. "I don't aim to hurt you, you should know that. But I couldn't turn you loose to follow me and find out where I was hidden."

A muffled snort was his only answer.

The roan hesitated at the bank of the river, then entered the water. There was a hide-out, he knew, where they never would be discovered, and they couldn't be trailed as long as he kept the horses in the water.

He turned downstream, rode steadily for many minutes. Once the roan stepped into quicksand, freed itself only by a startled leap. A peculiar grin crossed Corbett's flat face; his eyes lighted.

The night was more than half spent. Already the east was growing lighter. Dawn would soon be upon him, and hard-eyed waddies might be close at

hand. He pushed ahead, then gave a low sigh of relief.

He'd reached their destination. The river had entered a small canyon with rocky sides.

The roan balked, had to be forced to plunge toward a seemingly solid wall of sandstone at one bank. Corbett used his spurs, hard. The roan jumped, plunged through bushes and passed under a small arch. A moment later and it was climbing out of the water into a deep cave, fashioned by swirling torrents many years before.

"WE'RE here, Dorothy," the big waddie said calmly. "Sit quiet till I get a fire goin'."

By the light of a match he gathered dry brush, built a small blaze. The flames flickered eerily on the walls of the cavern. It was not too large, but big enough to hold the horses and their riders.

With gentle fingers Corbett removed the gag. "I guess it's safe now," he muttered. "Besides, it wouldn't do you much good to yell."

"You'll never know how I despise you, Tex Corbett," the girl said bitterly.

The big waddie nodded his head. "I guess I can understand, Dorothy. But before another twenty-four hours pass, I hope to change your mind. If I don't —you can take me in."

The girl's lips set firmly. She gave no answer.

Corbett piled more wood on the fire, tethered the horses at one end of the cavern, then opened a couple cans of beans.

"Poor fare," he admitted, "but all I had."

He glanced up. The girl was listening, hope flashing in her eyes. Then he heard it, too, the faint crash of riders going through brush, the dim shouts of waddies as they searched the river bank.

With a quick movement he grabbed the gag, jammed it back in the girl's mouth. Those hrosemen were coming nearer. He glanced at the fire, nodded with satisfaction. Its light was hidden from the outside. There was no danger of it being seen.

Nerves tense, he listened to the approach of the searchers. Their voices were coming clearly now, they must be almost opposite the hidden cave, but he had no fear of them finding it.

The roan and the girl's mount moved restlessly. A choked murmur came from the girl.

Corbett swung his head—and his heart stood still.

Coiled close to the fire, its ugly head swinging back and forth, was a giant rattler, beady eyes on the helpless girl.

Even as he looked, the big waddie knew what he'd have to do. He should have searched the cave when he first entered it, should have known that a rattler might have been trapped in it by the sudden flow of water in the old river bed, would be attracted by the heat of the fire. But he hadn't.

There was a gun in his pocket—the .38 he'd taken from the girl. But to use that would bring the searching party down on him at once, would mean his own finish and the escape of the real killers. He had to kill that snake, but he couldn't use the gun.

He spoke quietly. "Sit perfectly still. I'll get it."

The rattler swung its ugly head toward him at the sound of his voice. Deliberately he stretched out one hand.

The deadly warning rattle of the killer snake filled the cavern. Almost instantly it struck.

Only a waddie with perfect confidence in his own powers would have attempted the coming feat. And even though he was confident, Corbett knew he was risking his life.

A rattler's strike is one swift blur of motion. It can land, coil and strike

again, almost too fast for the eye to follow.

But the big waddie was fast, too. And he pitted his speed against the snake's.

As the rattler flashed toward his hand, that hand dropped. The snake landed full length on the rock floor of the cavern. It started to coil again—but Corbett was the quicker. His hand streaked down, caught the tail. His arm snapped. The head of the rattler popped from its slimy body.

LATER, long after sound of the searching waddies had vanished and the gag had been removed so that she could eat, the girl spoke.

"I wish, Tex, you weren't a murderer. Sometimes I find it hard to hate you, even though I know you must die for killing my father."

Corbett's heart lifted, but he gave no sign. Instead, he made two crude pallets on the floor of the cavern.

"Try and get some sleep, Dorothy. You've been up all night, an' I have, too. An' to-night—well, to-night I hope to show you I'm not the killer."

But he wasn't as confident when he woke, near sundown. He was risking everything on a hunch, and viewed in the cold light of reason, that hunch didn't seem so good.

And he couldn't afford to be seen by any one. By this time the entire country was searching for him. Kidnaping had been added to the other crimes of which he was accused—and was the only one to which he'd have to plead guilty, he thought grimly.

Rannies, red-eyed from lack of sleep, would be combing every foot of ground for miles in all directions. His only hope was that they'd gone over his own land thoroughly, that they wouldn't return, at least until another sunrise.

By that time his fate would be determined. Either he'd have cleared himself, or he'd have to confess that he stood no hope of ever doing so, would have to turn Dorothy loose and surrender, even though he knew it meant death.

Their slim meal was a silent one. The girl, too, seemed disinclined to talk. Once Corbett slipped from the cavern, took a quick look about. It would soon be time. It was almost dark.

"I'm goin' to make you an offer, Dorothy," he said at last.

The girl looked up, but said nothing.

"I'll give you your gun, free you, if you'll just do one thin' for me—an' that's simple. Come along an' see if you see what I think you will. If nothin' happens, you're free either to shoot me or to turn me in—it don't make no difference which. Will you agree?"

Dorothy looked into his eyes, held them steadily for a long moment. "I agree, Tex. But won't you tell me what you expect to find?"

The big waddie shook his head. "Nope. If it works out—you'll know. If it don't, it won't make no difference."

AN hour later they slipped from the cavern, on foot. Corbett carried his rifle; his flat face was as calm as ever.

But he was far from feeling calm. The next few hours would either solve the puzzle or seal his doom.

Silently he led the way through the trees along the river bank, moving noiselessly in the darkness. And behind him trailed the girl.

It might have been his imagination, but Corbett felt as if the river itself was whispering: "You must die! You must die!"

No breeze was stirring. The night seemed deathly still. Nerves grew tense. The faint rustle of grass underfoot sounded like peals of thunder in the big waddie's ears.

Oppressive heat poured in from the

baked prairies. An owl flitted like a spirit between two trees. The river moaned, as if it had a secret it wished to be rid of. It must have been on some murky night such as this when many spirits were freed from hard-bitten bodies as silent killers flitted through these very trees, wiped out a wagon train and all its escort.

The girl's hand gripped Corbett's arm suddenly, gripped it hard. He halted, keyed for instant action. The sound of steel striking against stone came clearly.

FOR almost a minute they stood motionless, then moved ahead again. And if their progress had been slow before, now it was snail-like. Not a sound showed their progress.

Once more came the sound of a metal object hitting rock, closer now. Then a voice broke the silence, a voice that sounded almost upon them.

"This is a hell o' a lot o' work."

"An' if it's all for nothin', I think I'll feel like shootin' you, Apache."

Corbett's eyes lighted; his lips parted in a smile of satisfaction. Automatically he brought his rifle higher in his two big hands.

"You're sure them posses won't be back?" the second speaker asked.

"Of course not. They searched here good, an' I told them we would watch Corbett's cabin, on the off chance that he might return."

A hoarse chuckle sounded. "You're smart, Apache."

The big waddie drew the girl to his side, then motioned to her to drop to her knees. Together they crawled forward on the earth bank, high over the edge of the river, parted bushes until they could see.

Apache Pinard and Suds Leggard were on the opposite shore. They appeared to be casting, as if fishing. But no ordinary fisherman ever used inch-thick manila rope, or a hook the side of a man's bent arm. And a strange catch lay on the shore.

"But you thought of killin' Harkness," came Apache's voice.

"An' you thought of puttin' his body in Corbett's cabin," complimented Suds.

The girl gave a gasp, leaned forward, the .38 lifting in her hand. Corbett grabbed, caught her wrist.

"Not yet, not yet," he whispered desperately.

The bank beneath them tilted. The big waddie tried frantically to lunge backward, to drag the girl with him. It was too late.

The next instant and soft dirt, undermined by the rushing water, collapsed. Two figures hurtled down, crashed into the river.

CHAPTER V.

A BURIED SECRET.

CORBETT was caught in the falling dirt. Dimly he knew he was struggling frantically to keep from strangling, that he at last got his head above water.

Beside him he heard Dorothy calling out, calling his name, and from the shore hoarse orders were being shouted. He shook his head, tried to clear his nose so he could breathe. His temples were throbbing; he seemed powerless.

Then he felt a rope fall over his shoulders, knew he was being yanked through the water toward the opposite shore. His head went under.

Half drowned and helpless, he was pulled from the river. Even as he fought weakly to get to his feet, his hands and feet were tied, he was thrown back against the ground.

"Shoot 'em, shoot 'em!" Suds was urging frantically.

"No, you fool," Apache snapped. "Some one might be within sound of a shot. There is a better way!"

A groan broke from between Corbett's lips. With success almost in his

grasp, he'd failed, had been caught by the very waddies he'd hoped to trap himself. He didn't care so much what happened to him, but the girl also was a prisoner. There was little chance that she would be allowed to escape.

"Can't we just fill this Corbett full o' lead and let the girl go?" Suds asked.

"Of course not," Apache rasped. "No tellin' how long she'd been listenin' to us. She heard us admit that we killed her father. An' we can't have any one know what we're doin' here."

The big waddie's lips set tightly. His worst fears had been confirmed.

The girl seemed to read his thoughts, to know he was berating himself for letting her run into danger.

"Don't worry, Tex," she said softly. "I don't mind dying with you, now that I know you are innocent."

Apache laughed evilly. "Too bad we must break up a romance," he jeered, "but business must come first."

"And a tricky kind o' business," said Corbett.

"You guessed what it was?"

"Yes," the big waddie said glumly. "I guessed. I'm almost sorry I did."

"We have not quite succeeded, but we will," Apache said pridefully. "You are not to die for a little while yet—as you will understand later. Watch, and you'll see somethin' interesting."

He turned, picked up the rope with the huge metal hook at one end, threw it into the river and watched it sink.

"I don't understand," said the girl.

"The old wagon train," Corbett said slowly. His rifle was lost, lost in the river. The girl's .38 had been taken from her, and she, too, was bound. Death waited them, but it had been delayed, and any delay meant a chance.

A queer catch had been fished from the river. If he could only get close enough to it, there might be a chance, a slim chance, but still a chance.

HE started talking swiftly, and as he talked, he wiggled slowly toward an object that had caught his eye, an object that had been fished from the river.

"You've heard the story, Dorothy, about how a wagon train from California was supposed to have disappeared alon' about here durin' the 60's?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, you know they used to say that train was takin' gold back east, a start o' an overland service, but that when this outfit disappeared, they gave it up, an' used ships around the Horn.

"That train vanished about the time o' the cloudburst that changed the course o' the river, an' nobody ever found a clue as to what happened to it. Lots o' folks hunted the treasure. It was supposed to amount to over a hundred thousand, but nobody found it, an' by and by most people forgot about it.

"But suppose that wagon train had been caught about here, an' the Indians that massacred all the guards wanted to hide all traces, where do you think a good place might be?"

"Why—why, in the river, I suppose, if there was quicksand."

"That's it," Corbett agreed. "In quicksand. But if you wanted to find that quicksand an' the treasure that was in it, you couldn't do it in a dry river bed. You'd have to have water to show you where the quicksand was."

"And that's why the river was stolen," the girl said excitedly.

"Sure," said Corbett. His voice didn't change, but his heart beat faster. He'd reached his goal now, a rusty flange of metal that once must have been used on a covered wagon. Lying on his back, he worked desperately, pushing the metal against the ropes that bound him.

"Apache here ain't much Indian, but he's a little. From some o' the old members o' the tribe he heard what happened to that wagon train, learned just

about where that treasure was hidden. But it didn't do him any good until he got water to find the quicksand. An' he had to get rid o' me so's he could hunt for the gold——"

"You're right, Tex," Apache broke in. "If you really want to know, that's why I tried to buy you out two years ago. Then I tried to run you out, but you wouldn't run, and Suds and I got sent to prison. This time I decided not to waste time. We planted the dynamite an' tried to kill you, but failed. So we shot the dynamite off anyway. It was just tough luck that the Harkness waddie had to come along while we were at it, but we killed him.

"Then we tried to get you again, but you got away. Harkness came along and we saw we could kill him and put the blame on you. That would get you away from here, and that's all we wanted. We needed time to work here without being bothered——"

He broke off, and a yell of triumph came from his lips. The hook at the end of the rope was snagged far down in the quicksand snagged on something heavy. Suds rushed to help him pull his prize from the clutching grip of the sand.

Cold sweat came on Corbett's forehead. The rope on his wrists was only half sawed through. If Apache had found the treasure, then death for both the girl and himself was near.

The old wagon wheels, the chunks of metal, were proof that the real location of the lost wagon train had been found.

"Don't worry, Tex," Dorothy whispered.

Corbett made no answer. His huge arms were straining. But the rope held. Frantically he rubbed his wrists back and forth over the metal. His flesh was cut, blood was streaming onto the ground, but he paid no heed.

A heavy object gave a dull plop as quicksand released it. Hurriedly Apache and Suds yanked it ashore.

"We've found it," came Suds's voice in an awed whisper.

ON the river bank lay an iron chest, rusty but still solid, snagged by the giant fishhook. Apache hammered at the lock.

"Here, let me give you a hand," said Suds. Together they gave a mighty heave. The lock parted.

Senseless curses poured from Suds's lips. He dipped his hands into the chest, let them play through pure gold dust, dust gathered by long dead miners, dust that already had cost more than half a hundred lives.

"Stop it!" Apache ordered crisply. "We've got to get rid o' these two now!"

Suds came to himself with a visible effort, jerked to his feet. His eyes were wild. The look he gave the captives was one of a man insane with lust for gold, a lust that made killing only a minor detail.

"Get the girl," Apache rapped. "I'll take Corbett. The quicksand held the secret o' the gold for all these years. It'll hold the secret o' what happened to these two forever."

Corbett's lips were white. Hope was gone. The murmuring water and deadly sand would close over their heads. They would vanish, even as the wagon train had vanished. And always he would be thought of as a murderer, and probably as the waddie who had killed the girl and concealed her body.

Suds ran forward, grabbed Dorothy roughly under the arms. Apache pulled a knife, came toward Corbett.

"I'm going to take great pleasure in this," he snarled.

The girl gave a faint cry, a cry cut off almost at once by the cruel pressure of Suds's hands on her throat.

That cry did something to Corbett. He went berserk. His huge muscles strained. Strength he didn't know he had swelled corded tendons. The rope,

already weakened by rubbing against the metal flange, stretched—then broke like a match stick.

APACHE cried out in alarm, leaped toward him, knife swinging. Suds Leggard dropped the girl, whipped out his gun.

The big waddie did not think, he was past thinking. His giant paws jerked out, grabbed Apache, yanking him downward. The knife caught him in the shoulder.

Suds fired. Perhaps he thought he could miss his partner and kill Corbett, or perhaps he thought that if he killed Apache he could kill the others, too, and have all the treasure.

His bullet smacked squarely into Apache Pinard's back. Apache gasped once, went limp.

As he did, Corbett hurled Apache's long body through the air. It crashed into Suds, half knocking him down. The little gunman strove to get his six-gun clear to fire again.

But if Corbett had been quick when he killed the rattlesnake, the big waddie was twice as fast now. Suds Leggard was a gunman, a killer with a reputation for speed.

He never stood a chance. Before he could fire again Corbett had yanked the knife from his shoulder, had sent it spinning through the air. Suds went down, the hilt of the knife protruding weirdly from his chest.

Shakily the girl struggled to her feet, hobbled toward the big waddie. Corbett yanked the rope from her wrists.

"I knew you would do somethin', but I wasn't afraid," she said.

The big waddie wiped perspiration from his flat face. He didn't think of the gold, gold that was rightfully his since it had been found on his ranch. and gold that would save that ranch, gold that had cost so many lives; he didn't realize that no longer would he have to go without coffee or tobacco.

There was something else on his mind, something he didn't know how to express.

"I—I didn't steal your river, Dorothy," he half stammered, "but—but there's somethin' else I would like to steal."

"Yes?"

"I—I—It's you!"

Dorothy lifted her head, looked shyly into his eyes. He read his answer there.

The river whispered as it rolled by, but no longer did it sound unearthly. It sounded almost happy. At last it had given up its dark secret. No longer would it be haunted by memories.

CHICKEN RANCHERS FIGHT GAS

THE barnyards of Oklahoma are the front line trenches of a new war—a war against modern chicken thieves. And the battle is with ultramodern weapons—for the poultry snatchers are using gas!

The gas is harmless to the feathered birds, just knocks them out and prevents them from making outcry when the coops are being invaded. The birds are then taken across the State line for sale.

But the farmers, like their forbears who settled the Cherokee Strip, have fighting blood in their veins and have called on the United States government to help them wage their battle against these chicken thieves.

And this is the peculiar angle of the law that permits Department of Justice G Men to take a hand in the case:

It is felt that the gassing of the poultry would contaminate the meat, and that by taking the chickens across the State line for sale would be breaking the United State Pure Food laws.

It was harsh; it was cruel—it was

DESERT JUSTICE

By Avin H. Johnston

A HOT desert sun blazed down from a copper-sheeted sky as the two bearded, weary men flung themselves down in the shade of a mesquite bush.

Joe Ressler, bearded, dirty and ragged, wiped a hand across his face, streaking it with sweat and dirt.

"Gosh, but it's hot!" he croaked.

Bob Neal nodded. He was beyond speech. Younger than his partner, less experienced in the ways of the desert, he had almost gone under more than once, but the taunts of Ressler had goaded him on until they reached this oasis in the desert, a clump of mesquite bushes, a few stunted cottonwoods, and water.

As the thought of the water struck the two men, they climbed to their feet. Ressler pushed Neal back into the shade. "Stay here! I'll get the water!"

He shrugged his shoulders out of the pack, grabbed the two water bottles, then strode out of sight up the bed of the broken canyon which contained the spring and the shade.

The canyon was a topographical freak in the desert. Merely a gash a mile long, only yards wide in the surface of the endless miles of sand, heat and shimmering hell. But it meant life.

Ressler strode around the bend in the canyon bed. Before him were two damp spots on the floor of the canyon. They were a matter of feet apart, blocking the bed of the canyon.

This marked the twin water holes, springs which bubbled out of the sand and rock of the canyon; life-giving water in the desolate expanse of death and heat which meant life to a thirsty traveler.

Each of the water holes were about

four feet across. The water was cool and blue, fresh, tempting.

But over one hung an ominous sign.

At some dim past date, a passing desert rat had tasted the water in these twin holes—and found one to be poisoned. He had erected a cross. The long base was buried deep into the rock and sand beside the poisoned water. The sign was brief, but clear:

"BEWARE—PIZEN WATER"

The words had been burned into the cross stick.

Close by the base of the cross was the eyeless skull of a burro. A mute warning to all who might pass that way.

Ressler shuddered, and making a wide sweep around the poison water hole, buried his head into the water of the good spring, drank deep, then filled the bottles and returned toward the spot where Bob Neal sprawled in the heat, panting.

Four yards from the water holes, Ressler suddenly stopped. He jerked around. For a long moment he stared at the water holes, and then his eyes narrowed. He grinned thinly, then went on toward Neal.

THE water put new life into both men. They cooked a rude meal, made coffee, ate with relish. Their first real meal in a week.

After the meal was over, each man removed a canvas roll from his pack. Golden nuggets twinkled in the sun. Nuggets of red gold, solid, glittering, wealth!

"Nigh on fifteen thousand here—in both rolls," said Ressler, fingering the nuggets. "Lot o' money!"

Neal nodded. "Yeah. And we sure deserve it!"

His mind flashed back to the three weeks of living hell they had gone through to get this gold, miles back in the desert, miles from any other human, in a craglike canyon.

They had dug all they could carry, then struck out for home. Their burro had broken its leg three miles from the gold-bearing canyon. They had shot it, divided their packs, then started out on foot across the searing surface of the sand.

Neal brushed a hand across his face to wipe out the memory of those last three days.

He rerolled his share of the gold, placed it in his pack. Stretched out on the sand.

"I'm going to take a sleep. Reckon we better pull out of here when the sun gets a little lower. We might be able to make that row of hills, if we hike all night." His voice died away as he fell asleep, his pipe dangling from his lips.

Ressler waited until the younger man snored, then he rose softly to his feet, disappeared up the canyon bed.

At the twin water holes, Ressler stood for a long time staring at the water. Then, with a curse, he stepped across to the sign-bearing cross, ripped it bodily from the ground. He then carried it to the side of the water hole containing the pure good water and buried the base of the cross, tilting it in a natural manner.

Jerking a branch of mesquite from a bush near by, he scuffed the sand and dirt until the ground showed not a sign of having been disturbed.

He next lifted the skull of the burro, then half buried it alongside the water hole. Then he stepped back to study his handiwork. He grinned. No one could tell that there had been a change made in the sign or the skull.

Ressler chuckled, glanced back down the canyon. Neal still slept. Ressler filled his own water bottle from the good water, walked back, still chuckling.

"Fifteen thousand! Just enough for

one. Why should it be divided? Best way! No bullet marks, nor nuthin'."

As the sun settled near the horizon, Neal woke. They made another meal, then Neal picked up his water bottle. Started toward the water holes. Ressler called out.

"Say, son. I forgot to tell you. Better watch out up there. One of them holes is poison-water. Its got a sign hangin' over it." He grinned. "I filled my bottle before."

Neal waved a hand, and disappeared. He returned in a few moments. The men packed up. They started out, turning their back on the water holes, facing the setting sun, and plodding their loads of the food, gold, and water bottles.

Ressler's lips twisted in an evil grin as he watched Neal.

THREE miles from the water holes, Neal lifted the water bottle to his lips, drank. Ressler's eyes gleamed. They went on. More than once Ressler cast a glance at Neal. The latter staggered twice. Once he rubbed a hand over his face in a vague gesture. Once he rubbed his stomach with the flat of his hand.

About ten minutes after he had taken the drink he stopped, swayed on his feet, and gagged.

"Funny!" he said. "My head feels wobbly."

"Maybe touch of the sun," said Ressler. "Take a drink. That'll help."

Neal lifted the water bottle, took a deep drink. The bottle fell from his hands to the sand, but the cap being on it prevented it from leaking. Neal sank to his knees, then fell forward on his face, clawing the sand, moaning.

Ressler stood back. He chuckled, and the chuckle broke into a laugh. Neal rolled over, his eyes rolling into his head. His hand clawed for the gun at his belt. Bending down, Ressler jerked it away, shoved it into his own belt. His laugh changed to a roar. He slapped his hip.

"Haw! Haw!" he roared. "You sure done it that time. You've been drinkin' poison water. I switched the signs. Haw! Think I was gonna let you get to town with seven thousand dollars in gold on your carcass? No, sir. That's mine, now, get me? All mine!"

He jerked around his own water bottle, shook it in Neal's face, then yanking off the cap, took a deep swig. Again he laughed. "Good water, see! I'm smart! The whole fifteen thousand will be mine—soon!"

He laughed again, not quite humanly. There was a greedy glint, part madness in his eyes. Neal rolled over. Ressler took a step toward the younger man. He stopped with a jerk. Over his face spread a look of terror, fear.

His fingers slid to his lips, pawed them. Then he ripped out a bitter curse. He picked up the water bottle, smelled it, then hurled it at Neal, cursing.

"Poison water!" he screamed. "Poison water!"

Wildly, he clawed at his lips, his stomach. Again he howled. "I'm poisoned!"

NEAL rose to his feet in one swift movement. Ressler was within a yard of him. In one lunge the younger man covered the space between them, snatched at his gun, got it, and stepped back. His sickness had disappeared. His eyes were level and cool.

Ressler was frothing at his lips, fingers still clawing wildly at his mouth.

"I'm poisoned," he kept sobbing.

Then, with a withering howl, he snatched at his gun, jerked it up, fired at Neal. The younger man ducked. The shot missed. Neal's gun blazed. Ressler dropped his own weapon from nerveless hands. Neal had shot the gun from his fingers.

Ressler dropped to his knees. His lips were working, and his hands clawed now at his stomach. The froth at his mouth had deepened in color. Suddenly Ressler was sick, deathly sick. He rolled on the sand, clawed at the dirt, coughed, gagged.

Neal stood to one side, his gun hanging from his fingers. The face of the younger man was grim, hard. There was no emotion on his face or in his eyes. They were like dead stone.

When he spoke, his voice was flat, toneless.

"You tried to kill, tried to poison me, Ressler. You wanted the gold. You switched the sign and the skull, Ressler. But you forgot one thing. An animal does not die with its chin in the air; it will lay on its side. You buried the skull upside down, Ressler!"

The man on the ground groaned weakly, lifted up on one elbow. Even as he was dying, Ressler cursed Neal, still frothing at the mouth.

"You—you filled the bottle—your bottle with poisoned water, then switched on me!" he howled. Then he started to laugh, wildly. He pawed the ground insanely, thumping and beating at it with his fists.

Peal after peal of mad laughter bubbled from his lips. Then, suddenly, he rolled over on his stomach, and his knees drew up to his chin. One hand moved convulsively—and he was dead.

Neal nodded slowly, and shoved the gun back into his belt.

"Yeah, Ressler," he said in a low tone. "That's just what I did do. I switched the bottles when we were packing. You were thinking so hard about the fifteen thousand dollars in gold that you didn't see me do it.

"It's desert justice, Ressler. Another thing that you forgot was, that poison water has a scum—you forgot to remove that. And if I hadn't changed the sign back—how many desert rats would have died from drinking that poisoned water? It's desert justice, Ressler, desert justice!"

WIRE-CUTTING WAR

THE West has seen Indian wars, range wars, cattle-stealing wars, wars over water holes, but little, in comparson, has been written of fence wars.

It was the invention of barbed wire that changed the West from a free range country to that of individual ranches, well-marked and the boundaries fenced in.

But many cattle raisers with little land of their own, fought against fencing to the last—and there came into being many bloody wars over fence cutting. Those who had cattle and needed range would cut the wiring enclosing outlying ranges and let their cattle roam on private land.

This was successful to some extent, because of the huge size of some ranches; but in other cases, it was the beginning of bloody feuds and battles, and it brought the Texas Rangers in, on one case.

One Ranger, in reporting to headquarters, stated that ranchers had gone to the extreme of planting dynamite along their fences and connecting the charge with the barbed wire, so that, when cut, it would blow up the wire-cutter.

In another case, he reported that while one rancher was stringing barbed wire over a hilly part of his ranch, enemies of the closed range were unstringing it farther back, out of sight of the rancher and his men.

But time and encroaching civilization soon brought to an end this nagging warfare between those in favor of open range and those who had fenced in their holdings.

The Pete Rice Club

SEE AMERICA

THERE are many fables which talk about those "distant pastures" being greener than the ones close to us; about things which we do not have always seeming better, more interesting, than the things we have. Not very often is anything done about showing us that the things at home are just as good as those away, but at last America is doing something about pointing out to its own people the beauties and advantages which lie here.

As part of the vast program of relief, there is under preparation a "guide book" to America; a book which contains everything worth while about this country; its scenic spots, its historic places, its personalities, its industrial centers, its natural wonders or monuments erected and created by man—everything that can possibly be put on record is being put on record, and thus made available to all those who are looking for authentic information on our country.

Americans have been well known for all the time and money they spend in their tours of other countries in order to gain "culture," atmosphere, or whatever they wanted to get. They rarely took it upon themselves to look into their own country first, for there was no one to point out the beauties and qualities of their own land. Possibly they did not go to much trouble to learn them for themselves—but that is pretty natural. If they had some one point out the places to visit, they might have done so.

Now these places will be properly presented to all those who are looking for some way of finding them. When the work of preparing all this matter is completed, and the books are made available to the public, there will be no need for any American to say that he lacks the information necessary to make a very pleasing and interesting trip to any point in this country. It will put everything up to the individual.

This tremendous task of gathering all this information into handy volumes is only the first part of the job of making Americans conscious of their own country. In a way, it is the easiest job, for it is concrete—it can be measured out into so many portions, and they can be done according to routine manner. But there remains a bigger job to do, if we are to make this the success it ought to be.

This second job is to make all our citizens conscious of the possibilities which lie here. It is to make them follow a line of thinking which, whenever they have in view a vacation, a trip, or anything educational, will make them think of America first, rather than the set and routine thoughts which usually come to the person seeking to see new and different places.

Other countries have learned to capitalize on whatever they have which might appeal to the tourist in such a way that it has, for years, furnished them an ample income, all coming from outside tourists. They have built up the impression of the beauties and sights so that every one is eager to see them, and the impression is so strong that, even if the actual sight is not up to par, no one says anything, because they feel

that it is a lack of appreciation on their own part which makes the sight seem insignificant.

That is the task which faces the American people to-day. They must fight the strong hold which all these other spots have on popular imagination. They must show our own people that here, within our own borders, are sights that are equal to any, and that are much better than most of the others. All of these sights can be seen at a smaller expenditure of money, and without the inconveniences which often accompany trips to other countries. No difficulties of language, of customs, or of excessive rates face you here, for the Americans, in real American fashion, do not feel that they have to take everything from the tourist in order to give him the impression that he has had a good time, or has seen something marvelous.

Every American should tackle that task with a strong heart, and an eagerness to make it successful as soon as possible. Start with yourself. Whenever you get an opportunity to go somewhere, pick a spot in this country, instead of seeking one somewhere else. Whenever you know of any one else planning a trip, call his attention to the advantages which come with a trip around our own land, and add to this the facts of beautiful scenery, historic spots, and everything else.

How can you do this?

Well, to begin with, make yourself a real American. Read over the Pledge of an American which you see on these pages, and see if you feel that you want to let your country know you are willing to do that much for your own land. If you are, then you are many jumps ahead of the average person who does not realize what he can do for his country.

The second step is to look at the coupon, and sign your name and address, then mail it in. From then on, the greatest part of the job will rest with you. It will be up to you to show that you are "Proud of America" in such a way that America will be proud of you. This club will do all it can to help you. Within these pages, we will bring to your attention all the many things which show that America is a land to be proud of. You, too, can express your opinions here, and learn what others have to say.

Once having impressed upon your own self the importance of our own land, then you are well equipped to pass on your enthusiasm to others. Coming from an individual they know is American to the core, they will more readily accept your opinion, for you will have the sound of authority in your voice.

This is the opportunity which every reader has now. Take it and start yourself on the way to a real American appreciation of our own land.

There is no charge for membership in the club. Your membership card and identification card comes to you without charge. The Pledge of an American is on the reverse side, so that you can have it constantly with you.

Those who wish to have the emblem —the sheriff's badge in sparkling nickel-silver finish, cut out like a real badge— can secure it for a small charge of ten cents. This is not necessary to membership, however. It is merely an accessory which many members like to have, so that they can wear it and let every one know they are affiliated with our club.

Let's have your membership to-day!

THE CHISHOLM TRAIL

FAMOUS in fiction, the Chisholm Trail is now the subject of a fact argument which will cause plenty of discussion before it is stilled. It all comes about from the action to mark the Chisholm

Trail as part of the movement to make plain all of our important historic routes and spots.

The part the old cattle trails—of which the Chisholm Trail is a section—have played in the history of the West cannot be overestimated. What our modern transcontinental railroad lines are to life to-day, the old cattle trails were to life in the old days. Over these trails, thousands and thousands of cattle were driven from the various ranches to the rail points from which they were taken to markets. They were more important than mere trails, for these routes were the life of the West. When a rancher sent his cattle to market, all his money was set on the trail, the prey of any one or anything which might seek to steal or destroy his season's work. There were bandits, of course, who might pick upon his herd and capture it completely, either killing the cowhands that were sent along, or sending them away. Or there might be small groups of men who sought only to cut off a small bit of the herd, profiting slightly, but not undertaking the greater risk of a big job.

Further, there were the ordinary dangers of the trail. Dry seasons, being lost or otherwise straying off trail enough to put water out of reach; disease or some other trouble might break out among the herd.

The Chisholm Trail was part of these trails. How important a part, or how big a part, is the subject of the argument. Some claim it went from San Antonio, Texas, up to Colorado. Others claim that it was only the distance from Caldwell, Kansas, to Reno, Oklahoma. Still others claim that it did not exist at all, and that the second of the two previous claims proves their statement, because, according to that, it is merely a part of a longer and better known trail—the Abilene Cattle Trail and Stage Road.

Whatever the outcome, we might note

THE PLEDGE OF AN AMERICAN

As a Deputy of the Pete Rice Club, I pledge to at all times do my duty to my country and myself; to obey its laws, uphold its traditions, to be proud of America and have America be proud of me!

Pete Rice Western Adventures,
79 Seventh Ave., New York, N. Y.

Gentlemen:

Kindly deputize me as a member of the Pete Rice Club to advance and uphold the traditions of our land and forward its progress.

Name .....

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City and State .....

(Those desiring emblem should inclose ten cents in coin or stamps.)

here that the name is derived from Jesse Chisholm, a Cherokee half-breed rancher. Chisholm died from eating improperly cooked bear grease, back in 1868. He took part in the cattle drives earlier in his life, but there is very little to the story of these drives to give him credit for the full length of the trail that his stanchest advocates are backing. He should, however, receive credit for at least creating one of the largest feeder trails to the main road.

FIND OLD STAGE

Remains of the old Mammoth Cave stage coach Florida, which was held up by Jesse James between Cave City and Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, September 3, 1880, were found recently by Horace Coombs, advertising manager of the Mammoth Cave operating committee, on the side of a bluff in the Mammoth Cave National Park area. The relics, which consist of the running gear, hinges, hubs, leather rocker springs, spokes, baggage carrier, leather boot, the remains of the tongue and other objects, will be preserved in the Mammoth Cave museum which is to be established by the National Park Service.

Old residents recall that Andy McCoy of Cave City was proprietor of the stage-coach line which brought many famous visitors to Mammoth Cave in the early days from the railroad station at Cave City. John Brady was one of the drivers of the old Florida, the coach which made regular trips. Pete Depp, now living in Glasgow, Kentucky, was another of the drivers and now has the old stage-coach whip, made by him of deer hide, which he intends to donate to the museum. When traffic was heavy, the stage line put on an extra small coach called the "jumper," presumably because of its motion on the road. The "jumper" was destroyed years ago, says a bulletin from the Kentucky National Park Commission.

The Florida was supposed to be bringing a large sum of money from the cave, the profits of a year's business, to the postoffice at Cave City, to be sent by registered mail to the heirs of Dr. John Crogham of Louisville, who owned the property. Jesse James and a companion held up both the Florida and the "jumper" at their meeting point, but failed to get the money, which had been sent by special messenger. A Kentuckian was arrested and convicted of the robbery, but was pardoned after the assassination of Jesse James revealed the identity of the bandit through recovery of some of the loot.

THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

Partly in North Carolina and partly in Tennessee lie the Great Smoky Mountains. They are the most mas-

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sive mountains in the East, and on these mountains, especially the part that lies within the boundaries of the park of the same name, are vast tracts of virgin forest. Included is the largest virgin forest of red spruce, and the largest and finest virgin hardwood forest in the United States.

All this section is mapped out to be a part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Although it has been designated a park, no actual work on accommodations and other improvements has been done, as the United States is prohibited by law from undertaking any development of the park until the minimum of 427,000 acres has been turned over to it for that purpose. However, this has not withheld the campers and visitors in the park, for the natural beauty of the place, and the many opportunities to really enjoy the open, have brought thousands upon thousands of vacationists and sightseers. The accommodations that the government has not been allowed to provide are furnished by private enterprise, and they are all of such fine quality that no one has found any discomfort or objection.

Much of the mountainous sections of the park have not been explored; there are great portions which have never seen the foot of man. Such things always furnish a great incentive to the active man, and there are many "exploring" parties in the park. Sometimes they return after having discovered some really beautiful section, and feel their efforts are more than repaid.

As usual, there is an abundance of wild life. Fish and game abound, with fishing especially attractive to the park visitors. A few of the streams are used for stocking purposes, and are therefore closed to fishermen, but there are plenty of others available.

Floral life is very interesting. There is an abundance of almost every conceivable flower and tree. Especially remarkable here are the rhododendron and the flame azalea, which furnish a beautiful sight for the visitor. Many waterfalls, large and small, add a further delight.

Trails there are aplenty, taking you either through the valleys, or up to steep mountainsides. Horseback trails make traveling easier for those who do not care for hiking.

Visitors to the park will be interested in the Cherokee Indians on the Qualla Indian Reservation, which is immediately south of the park. Although the Government has instituted here a comprehensive system of education and modern methods of living, ancient ceremonies and sports are still preserved as racial customs. The Indians still play the Cherokee game of ball—a sport far too strenuous for members of the Caucasion race. There are many experts in archery and blow gun. In 1838 an attempt was made to round up the Cherokees and remove them to Oklahoma. A considerable band escaped to the fastnesses of the Great Smoky Mountains and could not be found. The Cherokee of the Qualla Reservation are the descendants of those who hid in the mountains.

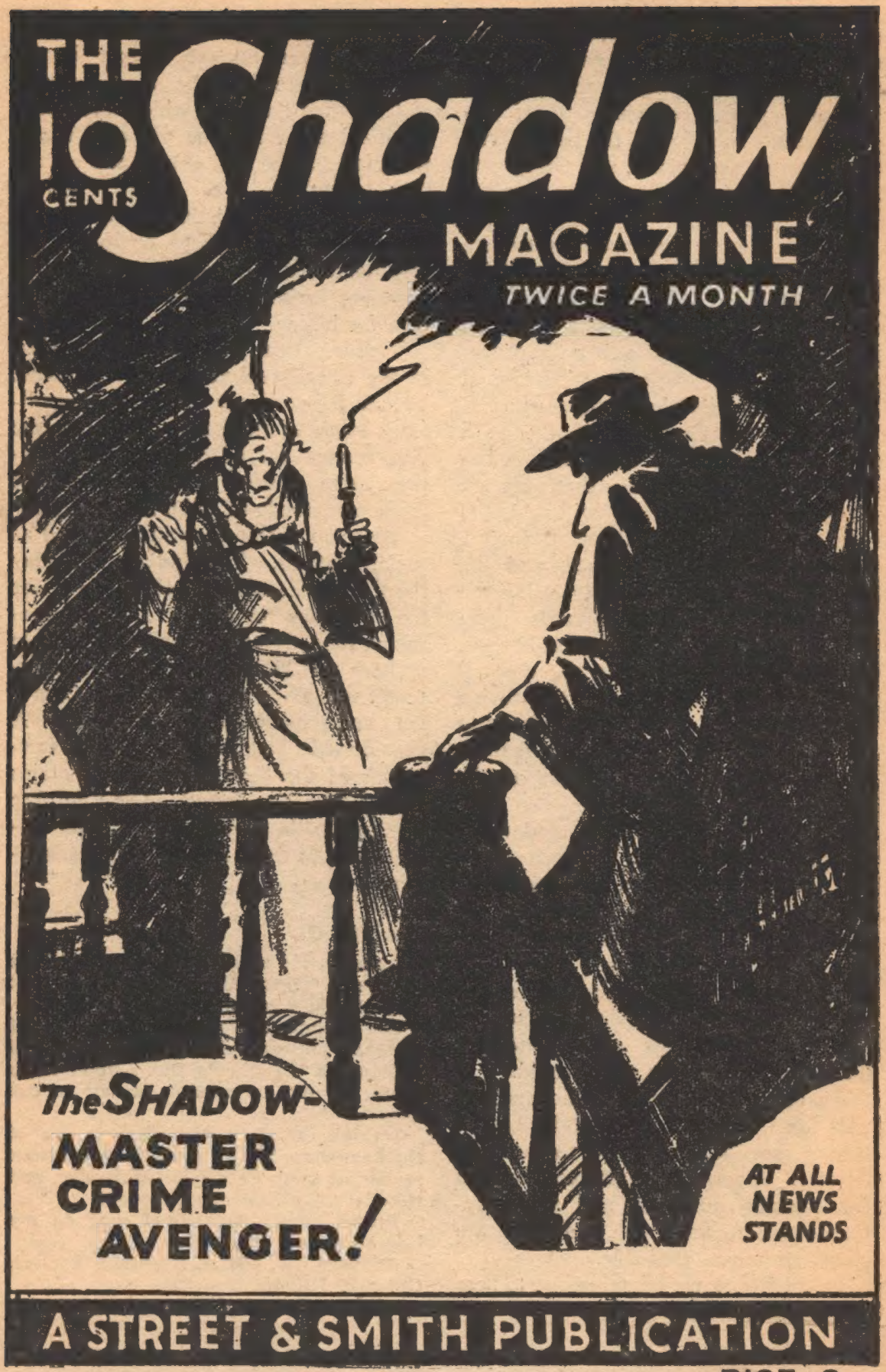
Not Too Old

I am writing to join the Pete Rice Club because I think this is one of the best ways to show my loyalty to my country. I am seventeen years old to-day, and I believe I am too old to play cowboys and Indians on the streets, but I don't think I am too old to interest myself in our nation.

I think the Pete Rice Club is one of the best there is. I have been a constant reader of your *Pete Rice Magazine*, and think it's the best magazine out.

Please enroll me, and I will do my best to uphold this club.

Arthur Cillo, 464 N. Keystone Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.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RICE—8

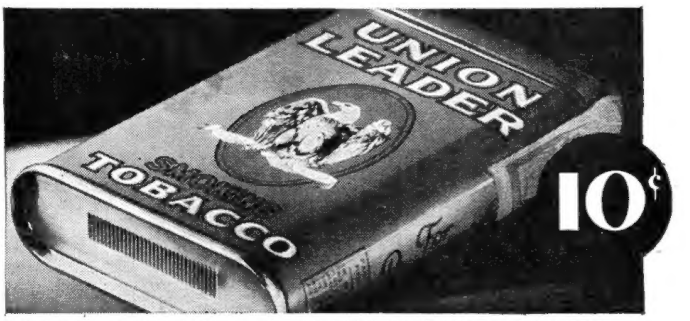
PAT O'BRIEN

Ex-football star. Made Hollywood debut in 1929. Now featured in "Devil Dogs of the Air," a Warner Bros.' picture. A Union Leader smoker since 1930.

"Believe me here's the best thing a dime is good for"

WHO says the best things always cost most? That rule doesn't work when it comes to tobacco. Because one thin dime buys a tin of Union Leader, and if any fancy mixture can top this *old*, mellow Kentucky Burley for aroma, flavor, and downright pipe-pleasure, I've never found it, and I've smoked some pretty snooty brands! (Great for cigarettes, too.)

UNION LEADER



THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKE

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LUCKY STRIKE
"IT'S TOASTED"
CIGARETTES
LUCKY STRIKE
Luckies
They Taste Bette
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